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ON THE FIELD OF HONOR
(Au Champ d'Honneur)

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(Au Champ d'Honneur)

BY

HUGUES LE ROUX

TRANSLATED BY

MRS. JOHN VAN VORST

2309L.173

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
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ON THE FIELD OF HONOR

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I

PARIS, *August* 1, 1914.

I HAVE known it since this morning: the mobilization has been decided. Robert, my lieutenant, is to leave for the front.

This has not come as a surprise. Last year he took a certain initiative which met with success. He found his own regiment quartered too far from the frontier. In case there was to be war, he wanted, from the start, to be on the firing-line. I did what I could to further this wish of his. The answer I received was: "This is not an especial favor. The reports we have received recommend this officer particularly highly."

I was glad of this.

The apartment where my dear son lives is situated directly opposite my own; the

Seine and the beautiful gardens of the Tuileries lie between us. I speed across them now.

His concierge is putting a few stitches in a pair of red trousers — my boy's trousers. This morning, as usual, he had already left the house by seven o'clock for his factory in the suburbs of Paris, in order to turn over to his chiefs his especial duties.

I shall go to his office in the old quarter of the Temple and wait for him.

Learning of my presence there the President of the Board of Directors says to me: "Your son is universally admired and loved among us here. We were so happy, three weeks ago, when we heard that he had become engaged. He seemed radiant with joy: a joy that must now be postponed."

A quarter to eleven.

The engineers returning from the factory tell me that Robert has gone back to Paris. He will not come now to his office; my best chance of finding him will be at his flat.

So here I wait in his salon in the Rue de Rivoli. Like his bedroom it is scarcely more than a chapel dedicated to the memory of his mother, for whom he has just taken off mourning. The portraits of his fiancée are here together with ours. His canteen is open on the divan; lying about are the shoes and clothes he has worn during the manœuvres. I continue to wait. I am impatient for his presence to put an end to the silence which reigns in these two rooms.

At last, here he is.

He says: "Well, this time it's a sure thing."

"My poor child!"

He knows it: that I am not grieving at what he must do. Ever since he has reached the age of reason we have talked together of the war, as one speaks of a beautiful dream. But how can I help thinking of his recent happiness, the joy he was about to realize, and which is now vanishing!

He understands and he smiles.

How well I know that smile! I saw it on

his face, ten years ago, the night his brother died. I had asked him not to sleep in the same room, which, since their earliest childhood, he and his brother had shared.

He answered me then: "I must become accustomed to it. The sooner the better."

To-day he says: "If this had happened last year, when I was leaving for the manœuvres, I would have been glad beyond words. But now . . . ! It was hard for a moment, but that's past — everything is all right; only I can't help regretting that I must leave without seeing 'her' again."

His mobilization billet will not in any case be delivered to him before this evening. And yet, I can scarcely persuade him to do what he most desires.

Presently we are rolling along in the August sunlight upon the road which leads to a far-away country place. In spite of the sun's glare I have the impression that the way has been swept by a tempest. Already there are no more men to be seen anywhere. The women, standing in little groups, talk together before the doors of the houses. They are deep in conversation; they lift their arms, gesticulating, relating each her own adventure. Those who stand alone are weeping. The road is clear, moreover, of all traffic, of all the heavy peasant carts which usually encumber it and which go on their way heedless of the motor's horn.

We scarcely speak: not only because of the roughness of the cobblestones, but because we should have too many last things to say to each other.

"Don't forget, my boy, what experience I have had in my explorations. Believe me when I tell you that it is better to sleep on stones, on pebbles, than on the ground itself. The war will come to an end and you must return well and strong for 'her' sake."

He smiles more cheerfully than just now and he slips his hand into mine. I hold it fast as though he had become a child again.

II

SHE did not know that we were coming, his little fiancée, but her heart was awake to every sound that passed. We have not time to ring; already the gate is open.

I have known her only a short time, this young girl, in whom the only boy left me has placed all his love and all our hope. My intercourse with her has been the mere contact of superficial politeness during a brief engagement.

Now, with her beautiful hair flying loose about her poor, tragic face, with her tears, she is no longer the amiable stranger whom one welcomes, for better, for worse, with an indulgent smile. She has become one of us through our common suffering.

She throws herself into her fiancé's arms.

Looking at them I recall a little song which seems to sound now in my memory, like a sob. It expresses, as a passionate people understand it, man's chance of happiness:

"Two kisses I hold fast in my soul's
very depths,
And which never leave me:
The last my mother gave me,
The first I took from you."

Helen's mother has gone to Paris hoping for news. Her daughter wants to follow her, so, together, we three set out for the railroad. The train will take us more quickly than the motor, to Paris.

In the compartment I leave the two fiancés alone. I keep my eyes turned toward the window.

Trains of soldiers pass us one after another. The horses seem in splendid condition; the men are standing at their heads. Their bare, muscular arms are halfway out of the windows of these improvised stables. Men and animals are a picture of strength, magnificent, irresistible. They pass followed by cheers.

In a cattle van, just like these, fifteen months ago, in Bulgaria, I spent a day and a night among the soldiers who had been carried off the battlefield. Bleeding, dying, they lay there in the straw! . . . Away with such memories! I must not show my anguish to these two children who are still talking together of their hopes, of their future happiness.

No order has been sent to the Rue de Rivoli to the address of our lieutenant. Helen goes to join her mother. This evening Robert will dine with them; I will come at midnight to find my boy in his rooms.

The news which is given me at the Foreign Office somewhat raises my hopes.

The Premier has told the German Ambassador that "mobilization does not mean war"!

The Ambassador has proposed some possible negotiation in which England, Russia, — Germany herself, — may take part. Austria would then be invited to heed the advice of Europe and the result would be peace.

What a long way I have travelled since this morning!

The word "peace" seems to weigh upon my heart.

III

WHEN, at midnight, I ring at the apartment in the Rue de Rivoli, the concierge is sleeping, the house is in darkness.

It is the first time I have been here at night. I creep up the stairs, feeling my way. There are two hallways, a lift, a glass door. Not sure at all, I try rapping, at my right, upon what chances to be the right door.

No particular instructions have been sent to my lieutenant, but posters placarded everywhere by this time are calling the men not to wait for more formal notification. So it is to-morrow morning that he is to leave.

I found him writing a few letters to different relatives, to old friends, to his sister, — our Marie-Rose, — whom the mobilization finds in Normandy, too far away to reach her brother before he leaves.

He asks me to send my servant, now and

then, to clean his rooms and to brush his clothes: "So that things won't be eaten by the moths when I return."

Again he smiles.

The news which I bring him, and which I no longer believe myself, as we stand there before his closed canteen, his revolver, and his glistening sword, does not seem to touch him. He does not wish the enemy's retreat.

"Now that the sacrifice is made!"

His thoughts and mine are with the little fiancée; he says with melancholy: "When I consider myself only, I envy those who were married yesterday. When I put myself in her place, I realize that all is for the best."

I beg him to lie down and get some rest. On the divan there is a prayer-carpet which I gave him. Often in my tent, in Africa, I had used it as a bed, when I was travelling alone, across the sands, the underbrush, the mountains, or the swamps.

I long now to stretch myself out on this little rug and to sleep until morning under the same roof with my boy, — until morning, when I can go with him to the train. But obviously this is not his wish. He does not give me his reasons, but I can imagine them.

It is not for me that he reserves his final adieu; he surrounds his love with a certain mystery as though to isolate it.

How well I understand him without his speaking.

My beloved son, I, too, am capable of sacrifice. I recall the days when the robust athlete, which you have now become, was only a poor little child, suffocating with croup. The surgeon's knife had gone deep into your throat. All about you, those who cherished you, had been contaminated by the horrible contagion. You had been reduced to the last stages of infection, — the newspapers had announced the death of my son. But I was determined to fight to the end and to save you. Seated by the seaside, on the beach, I held you in your agony. When I saw you sinking away, I gave you ether. I dropped champagne or cognac into your baby throat.

I brought you back after days of struggle, during which I loved you as a father and as a mother. There, lying against my breast, dear son, you were born again; and yet, your last thought now is not for me. You belong more to your own hopes for the future than to me. No doubt it is a privilege to be able to give you both to your country and to love.

He must get some sleep now.

He takes a candle. Together we descend the complicated stairs where I had groped my way, in the shadows, alone.

The concierge is still sound asleep. At a time when silence is so precious we are obliged to call and call. One would almost think me impatient; in a hurry to get away.

At last the door opens.

There, on the threshold, I bid my boy farewell. The candle he holds in his hand throws its light upward. I see him as he stands before me with his blue leggings, his red trousers, his flannel shirt. As I put my arms about him, I feel his shoulders, his back, — so strong, so muscular.

As I bend over to kiss him he smiles and he says: "You know that I shall do my duty, and a little more, if I have the chance."

IV

JUST now I passed in front of the railroad station by which he left this morning.

The streets, the boulevards, make a dangerous crossing on account of the mad rapidity with which the automobiles speed by. They are loaded with soldiers, in all sorts of uniforms, hastening toward the train. Flags are swung from every window. The street is decorated as for the 14th of July. The crowd fills the sidewalk, the street itself. The dense masses part at the sound of the bugles and then close again. There is a sound unbroken like the murmur of the sea. All is an atmosphere of confidence, of honor, and of gayety. The people seem to have aroused themselves to the joy of action after forty years of waiting, which have held them as by an evil spell. Here and there, however, women, young and old, move along as though walking in their sleep!

In the Rue Lafayette I met a couple who have haunted me since. A workman of about thirty, strong and yet already slightly bowed under the weight of labor and of hardship. By the hand he held his little girl — a child of about six. She had on an apron and a little bonnet which covered her brown hair. He was talking to her as one speaks to a grown-up person who is already well accustomed to being resigned and who understands that courage is a duty.

He kept saying to her these two words, which, ever since yesterday, all the men one meets are whispering to the women clinging to their sides:

"You understand . . ."

And she "understands," this little girl of six years old. She "understands" that the mother she once had has long been dead, but that she still had the father — somewhat rough, perhaps, but so kind — the father, whose hand she now holds. She "understands" that presently she must loosen her grasp; that her father then will lift her up in his arms, and that he will kiss her; that he will leave her with people she scarcely knows, going off without turning his head. All this she "understands" very clearly, the little girl of six. She was not crying; she had "understood"!

As I looked at her I felt my heart heavy with shame. I said to myself: "Your son is not the only one to go."

And my thoughts turned toward the young men of twenty who, every Sunday, filled our country house.

I think of you, Charles, my sister's son, whom my mother loved so tenderly. In two months' time you were to have finished your military service with the grade of lieutenant. Your father was so proud to feel that a boy who has passed his law examinations, who has been graduated from the School of Political Science, is well prepared for the battle of life. But it is into this other struggle that you must first enter, my Charles. I know that you will honor us all.

And I thought of you, Jean, the son whom I have adopted in my heart, to comfort. You remember? My poor boy, Guy, had not long been dead and I was still looking for him everywhere. One summer day, in the train which took me daily to my work, a young man got into my compartment and sat down opposite me. It was a shock to me, but very sweet. There, before me, was my lost child, just as I had known him when he was eighteen. The same silhouette, the same peculiarities of physiognomy, the same eyebrows, eyes of the same color. I longed to hear the sound of his voice.

When we reached Paris I could not resist longer. I went up to you, my dear Jean, I touched your shoulder. I said, so humbly: "Excuse me, sir, . . . But you look so much like a son whom I have lost. . . ."

And it happened that you had just the soul to greet such a confidence. You told me yourself that you were about to lose a mother you adored, your grief helped you to understand my own. A few days later you led me to the bedside of your dying mother. She could well be proud, indeed, of the five children who surrounded her then. Yet, when she spoke of you, her voice had a peculiarly tender note. She said with such appealing warmth that she hoped her "little Jean" might become mine.

Thus the farewell with this charming mother made between us a bond. How is it possible that a boy of twenty can become the friend of a man whose temples are already growing grey? Yet that is what happened. Sundays when you came, winter and summer, to join the gay little crowd who surrounded my son and my daughter, you were the only one who found your way to the room where I took refuge in solitude, fearing that my presence might put a restraint upon the freedom and hilarity of the young; you came to keep me company; you took pity on me.

You remembered, as an own son might, all the anniversaries whose memories sounded like a melancholy bell in the depths of my heart. I was so proud of you, when, your two years of military service finished, you came back from Saint-Mihiel, seeming a true warrior, after the two years of iron discipline imposed upon the frontier regiments.

I used then to say to myself: "It is my son Guy, just as he would have returned to me from the army."

To-day, my little friend, it seems to me that you are going to war with two souls, yours and "his," two valiant souls, made to harmonize, two souls guarded by their mothers in heaven.

How glad I would have been if I could have taken your head a moment between my hands and kissed your forehead before you set out this time!

I thought of you, too, my dear Max. You're just eighteen, and it is not for you that the bugles sound. Yet I know you! You will join the others as soon as you have learned to handle a sword.

Do you remember the May mornings when you used to ride in our forest with Robert and Marie-Rose?

Your dear mother used to say to me: "Don't give him too wild a horse."

To-day she is prepared to let you mount the war-horse which will carry you to danger, to glory. You and she know that you are the son of the man who was at the head of our Government at a time when it was necessary to choose between sacrifice and ruin, and who conquered the egoism of certain madmen, by pleading the cause of France.

Carry your gayety, like a lark, into the camp where you are going now, Max. Our eyes will follow you skyward.

V

August 3, 1914.

My dear Son:

How often in my life I have been the one to leave.

Above all, beyond all, beyond joy, honor, profit, I seemed to be called. Sometimes the call came from within; sometimes from without. It sounded as the voice of those I have loved. It was as a command from the forefathers whose names I could not tell you, — Bretons, Normans, — these ancestors of mine, sea-men who, in their barks, their ships, had roamed at large, loving the wind as they fought it between the sea and the sky!

Again, for months, for years even, at a time, the imperious summons seemed almost silenced. I was able to enjoy the pleasures of existence with an ardor peculiar to those who touch port, knowing that to-morrow they shall embark again. Suddenly then a land breeze would spring up, tearing me with it away from everything, from the shelter of my home, from the pleasure of laying my hands upon your childish heads.

I was impelled to leave.

For twenty years this voice of my ancestors sounded in my ears; it filled my heart with longings and with determination. It seemed to show me the way I was to set out upon.

How could I dream that, for me, the final harbor would be a tomb, the square of green sod, where my first-born son was laid at twenty, his hands full of earthly hopes? How could I foresee that in leaving us his soul was to be followed by another soul, that the mother would join the son, and that, in the midst of my journey, I must cast anchor between two mounds of earth?

One thing is certain; since I have learned to distinguish the faint breath that bows earthward the grass above the graves, the imperious Voice within me has been silenced. It is no longer to me that it calls when the Dead make known, with an irresistible power, their will. It is to you now, Robert, that it must appeal, — to you, my only remaining son, the last of our name, — you who are the final expression of so much courage, vanished forever beneath the earth and under the seas.

Shall I tell you when I realized that you had been summoned, too, by this voice of my Youth?

It was one night last year when you said to me: "If there should be war I want to serve on the frontier."

Amen! May this command of your forefathers guide you and uphold you when the moment comes to choose. Only, don't forget, to-day, that I, who was formerly the wanderer, have become the one who stays behind.

Write to me often, my boy.

VI

All that occurs in our family while our sons are fighting is an example among innumerable others of the effort which our present duty imposes upon us French people.

In the South, my brother-in-law, Professor of the Faculty of Surgeons, has been ordered to take charge of a Red Cross hospital. A second brother-in-law, the father of Charles, has resumed his uniform as Field Surgeon. My two sisters are both acting as nurses. My daughter Marie-Rose, my niece Alice, have entered two hospitals in Normandy as assistants of the "Union des Femmes de France."

I have been given a special task at the War Office; it is my duty to receive, and to comment upon, the news which the General Headquarters, in accord with the Government, prepare for publication at midnight.

At the late hour when I come in search of this manna which to-morrow is going to nourish the hearts of the people with hope or with anxiety, the door of the War Office is guarded as though it were the entrance to a fortress. All the façade is aglow with lighted windows. The information received, the orders sent out, leave no time here for rest, night or day.

On the ground floor of the Rue Saint-Dominique the attendants are lined up as usual, with frock coats and white cravats. A statue of the Winged Victory, the Goddess of Samothrace, spreads its wings, headless, at the top of the stairway.

I cannot look at this decapitated splendor; the symbol is too unfortunate, placed thus upon the very threshold of the Palace of National Defence.

My thoughts speed on, up the long flights of stairs, they push open an unfamiliar door.

Here, before the war, I had had inspiring talks with the Generalissimo, to whom we, the fathers, the old men, the women, have confided all the hopes of our country, our race. I like to recall his image: strong as a giant, calm, sure of his own power. I like to remember his clear, steady gaze and the confidence which the spirit of his men awakes in him.

In the shadow of this Great Chief I see you, dear lieutenant, who are the incarnation for me at this moment of all our warring youth.

You smile at me and you say: "Have faith. We are commanded."

VII

EVERY night, before attempting to sleep, I read over the two bulletins which are the warp and woof of my existence: the midnight communiqué and the last letter from my son.

It is almost three weeks now since you left, my child, and already history has been re-made. Liège has barred the way against the Germans. The English army has come to reënforce our defence in the North. In Alsace our flag reappeared and was again, alas, torn down. On the highways of our open country which, in perfect faith, we considered protected by a treaty of honor, the enemy is now advancing. We are retreating, but in closest contact with our adversary, face to face, our arms locked in a death-struggle.

The officers of the État-Major who, every evening, before an open map, comment for me upon all that is obscure in the communiqué, keep repeating: "Our offensive has become a defensive, but we are retreating only momentarily. To-morrow we shall have touched a base from which to swing."

I, too, feel faith in our troops, in our chiefs, in the final triumph of Justice. So I hasten back to my newspaper. The stenographers who take down what I dictate follow one upon the other. I see no change of expression on their faces. Always I try to keep in mind as I compose my article, whether the news be bad or good, those who are to read it to-morrow, those whom I would guard against undue discouragement or too great elation.

This done, I walk across Paris in the darkness of the night already paling into dawn. To quiet my anxiety I walk alone in the middle of the streets, silent, sonorous. As I pass your door, my son, I greet your memory. I cross the river as the stars are growing dim. And, of course, before closing my eyes, I re-read your last letter.

It is balm for me who try to be a giver of balm. These little pages, scratched off with a pencil, reflect the wholesome state of mind of your companions and yourself. Your courage is not abated by the reading of such bulletins as you find pasted on the doors of the town-halls. Your eyes are turned toward the enemy; you are absorbed in the task before you; you think of naught else but your determination to be victorious.

VIII

August 23, 1914.

I WAS looking forward, my dear Robert, with melancholy, to this date of August 23d. Ten years ago to-day, your beloved brother, Guy, just twenty, left us forever.

I was on my homeward way from an exploring expedition in Africa. My thoughts sped on before me; on the platform of the railway station I fancied I could see those I love, and who love me, standing in a little group, expectant, joyous.

You alone were waiting to meet me in reality. There was no time to be lost if I wished to look once more into the eyes of my boy, my first-born.

I lived over those hours as I passed before our house in the forest, the house where, from one year to another, I used to write down, my children, the marks which showed how much you had grown, as you stood against the door of my study.

Why I do not know, but this memory of happy days seemed to rise up as I went on my way to visit the graves of our loved ones.

One summer's evening, soon after we had come to live in the old house, and when we were still full of happy plans for the future, at about six o'clock, a stranger rang at our door. Without giving his name he asked to be received.

I greeted in him an elderly man, well and honorably known. He said to me:

"Twenty-eight years ago I lived in this house with my young wife. The War of 1870 broke in upon our happiness and we were obliged to escape from our home. Once, during the German occupation, however, I ventured to return here to see what havoc the barbarians had wrought in our nest.

"The vision of it was unbearable. An officer of the commissariat had installed himself in the middle of the courtyard. To settle certain payments he had taken out from our drawing-room a table, a precious bit of furniture. His boots, which he did not wish to dirty, were placed on a cushion which my wife had embroidered. Behind him, on the lawn, a hundred horses, with their riders, halters in hand, were picketed.

"Since then the wife of my youth has died and I have never had the courage to return here. But just now, happening to pass the door of your house, — our house, — I saw the lights in the windows. I asked who lived here. I was told your name. I rang, and I came in to ask: 'In the spot where I have known such joy, are you in turn happy?'"

Since then, often, on my way home from Paris in the train, I have recalled that visit, always with something like a shudder. When the moon shines, the big tree in the garden hides, with its sombre shadow, all that lies behind it. It seemed to me that I, too, could see the German soldiers there; the phantom horses, the paymaster, with his heels dug into the silk of a cushion.

Are these vandals to return?

Just now, as I drove along the road by Mont Valérien, they were blowing the houses up with dynamite. They were making the way clear for the cannon's aim.

For the first time, as I sat by your graves, I have not regretted, my Guy, that you and your mother should have entered into peace.

Watch over your beloved one, who is fighting now, and know, if you can, that here below we are living through terrible hours in which our poor hearts sigh:

"Blessed be the Dead!"

IX

So, then, the presentiment which oppressed me in the cemetery is to come true?

A second time, since I have been able to understand and to suffer, we are to see the heart of France, Paris, pierced by their ruthless lances?

The other evening, when I reached the War Office, they let me pass without looking at my permits. The Court of Honor was only dimly lighted. The official attendants had disappeared from the hall, where they stand. The big room beyond was plunged in utter darkness.

I waited there a long time, opposite a statue of the great Carnot, meditating, with his chin resting on his hand. Through the transparent curtains before the windows I could see a military automobile standing at the entrance steps, and its lanterns lighted feebly this statue.

How heavily this tête-à-tête weighed upon my weary heart. I seemed to be watching alone with him who had organized the victory.

At last a soldier who passed with a pile of documents under his arm said to me: "The major who usually receives you is gone."

Through the intricate hallways he led me to a little office where I found my habitual informant. He was in campaign uniform. He said to me, with a solemn kind of joy: "The Minister has granted me the favor of joining my regiment."

Then he asked: "What news have you of your son?"

"I only know," I answered, "that he is impatient to begin fighting."

"He will have satisfaction."

This morning I understood, as did the rest of the people in France, why all was in darkness last night: the Government has left us. Naturally the press has to follow. I am to remain here to serve as a bond between our Paris "Matin," which will continue to publish an edition, and the new Military Governor.

I have known him for years, and I love him, this pilot who is to guide us in the present storm.

In the days when he was governing his African island and when I myself was struggling in the mud of the Nile, we used to correspond.

I go now to ask him to direct me.

His voice, made for commanding, seems to chop off his words as though with a sword. He says to me: "To all who approach me I insist upon this one simple thought: in the present struggle, our lives, the lives of those we love, do not count. Such is the price of Victory."

Then, after a silence: "Yesterday I saw a regiment of whom the necessary sacrifice had been asked. There were ten who returned. They brought me back their flag. Here is the example to spread abroad."

X

THE first one of those I love succumbs! This is the message I receive:

Dear Mr. . . . . . .

I have sad news for you. My poor brother Jean was wounded by a bullet in the head. Since then he has been missing!

Is there any way to find out if he has been carried to some ambulance? My family know nothing of this. I would be glad to talk with you.

This is what I have been able to learn more precisely: Jean was fighting in the North. Bewildered by a heavy mist his regiment came full upon a mitrailleuse in ambush; seven hundred of his companions were shot down. Jean was safe. But as he was turning back to join his major, suddenly he said: "I have been struck."

The bullet had hit him in the head. He took off his cap. He was bleeding terribly. He said again: "It is nothing."

He was seen crawling toward a little wood in which he hoped to take shelter; the grove was full of our wounded. The Germans, knowing this, set fire to it!

I have just seen Jean's brother.

I insisted to him that wounds in the head, if they do not kill at once, can heal; that Jean has probably been carried into a German ambulance, or made prisoner, none of which, of course, I believe myself.

He listened to me, the poor brother. He seemed to be convinced. Then suddenly he said in a low tone: "But suppose that they have tortured him to death by setting fire to the wood?"

I waited until he had gone, to weep.

Is it true, my little friend? Shall we never see each other again? Have I known your charming spirit only to lose you? And by a refinement of cruelty destiny has ended your life on this sacred date of the 23d, when, ten years ago, I closed the eyes of the son who seemed in you to have come to life again. I lose you, and, in you, I lose my boy a second time.

XI

September 13, 1914.

I HAVE kept from Robert the news that Jean has been killed. He must not know how dearly victory is costing us.

"I want you to feel, my son, how steady Paris has been in learning that fate has turned in our favor and that her majesty shall not be violated.

"The clear Sunday morning when Paris received the news of her delivery, there was no singing, no celebration, no excited crowds filling the boulevards. Paris wanted no other hymn of joy than the text of the official communiqués, which, after being cursed for their reserve, had suddenly let fall the veil, to show you to us, you, our combatants, in your glory.

"I have just returned from the battlefield. With my own eyes I have seen the hideous spectacle which you describe so discreetly in your letters. As usual, indescribable filth. The Germans had accumulated empty cases, stolen clothes, precious objects, scattered and dishonored. The champagne and cognac bottles were as numerous, lying about the overturned cannon, as the empty shells themselves.

"I saw their dead abandoned on the earth; quantities of apples which had been shaken down by the bombarding were piled up around the bodies.

"They were the Giants of the Guard.

"By what miracle, my son, are you able to overthrow them, in a hand-to-hand struggle, these creatures who seem to tower above you with all their height and with all their weight?

"I know! You are acting of your free will and they are merely obeying orders. They are seeking a prey and you are fighting for an idea.

"But how can I help shuddering, my son, when I read your last letter?—'My men are now seasoned against the bombarding, the constant bursting of shell. I am waiting to test them in an attack with the bayonet.'"

XII

Is it my grief over Jean or is it the dreadful scene of the battlefield? For the last ten days I have lived without letters. I can no longer sleep.

I know only too well how to read the communiqués not to understand that, vanquished on the Marne, the enemy is seeking a revenge on the Meuse.

It is there, my Robert, that you and your comrades are making your resistance, at what a cost!

Without indicating exactly the spot, without any date, the résumé of yesterday commended highly your valor. It concluded bluntly: "On both sides the losses are heavy."

I carried that weight to-night on my homeward way.

At the hour I return, all the lights are extinguished or lowered; the moon, triumphant, seems to make of Paris a vast sepulchre. I looked at this pale light in the heavens and I thought to myself: "You who are walking here, poor man, after your day's work, and who go now to seek a little rest before morning, — do you know even whether, at this moment, somewhere, on the ground, your son is not stretched out now, his mouth and his eyes open?"

The anguish was so intense that I believe I groaned, like a lost dog, in the night.

Yes, life and death no longer have the same value as of old, in time of peace. A few months ago, my Robert, your sister, you, and I read with astonishment one of the stories of '93 in which the youth of France mount the scaffold with a smile. So much courage, so much detachment, seemed to us almost incomprehensible!

To-day we understand. You, the combatants, who have gone to the very source of heroism itself; we, who love you and who have now at stake more than our own lives, — we understand. For you, as for us, one thing alone matters: the "Day of Glory" must dawn.

This is what you think, is it not, and what you want me to think, my son, wherever you are — beyond the moon?

XIII

September 20, 1914.

In the letters which he wrote to me regularly up to the end of August, Robert made things as clear as he could without disobeying his chief's orders. He spoke to me of what he himself is the most interested in: his men and their manœuvres.

Yet, I have no great merit in imagining that doubtless his fiancée, our dear Helen, has probably been more liberally dealt with. In order to quiet my anxiety, I have begged her to send me a few crumbs of her riches. She has just sent me a veritable Blue Book. Since the beginning of August, until the first contact with the enemy, our Robert has related here the story of his soul.

What emotion for me who have followed his every move for the last ten days, to see how he avoids in his letters all that could give his beloved a shadow of anxiety. To read what he says, over Helen's shoulder, one would really think that he is telling about the manœuvres in some land of dreams — where the flowers grow only to be offered to a fiancée, where the moon rises only to light up her apparition!

If you return, my son, from this enchanted country, where, by the magic of your love, the shells are turned into roses, how well you will deserve to be made happy by this child of your choice.

If you are to climb higher and ever higher the way of sacrifice, to the height where stands the cross, then glory be to this young love which fills your soul, and, in the horrors of war, enables you to live a supernatural existence.

XIV

LETTERS FROM ROBERT TO HELEN

August to September, 1914 (*Fragments*)

August 2, 1914.

My little fiancée, so dear to me:

From our first halting-place I write you my first letter. The way has seemed very long to me as I was going ever farther from my happiness.

We were herded together in the corridors of the train, seated on our canteens, and, as each of us was wearing his best smile, we looked quite like some pleasure excursion starting off. The peasants, scattered along the track, were in the same good humor. We asked them: "Who will bring in the harvest?"

Everywhere the answer was the same: "The women!"

And we were greeted by the waving of handkerchiefs.

I found some of my old comrades, and the contact with them seemed to make me a soldier again. All my life in Paris seemed already so far away; but you, you stood out above everything. I tell those with whom I have become acquainted (one grows intimate quickly nowadays with people of one's own milieu) that I am engaged. Every one has something kind to say. In the train I ran across an employé from the factory. He spoke to me of you at once, timidly, to please me.

"Were you able to bid each other goodbye?" he asked. "How sad you must have been!"

What a good fellow!

My little Helen, I think of you constantly. I listen to your watch on my wrist and to your last words in my heart.

August 3, 1914.

You wished that I might find a friend. I have found one, a colleague of my father. He directs a large illustrated paper which you have known since your childhood; he has written several successful plays. For all this, this veritable Parisian is the most simple, the most cordial of companions one could imagine for such a campaign.

We shall call him, if you will, by his first name, Lieutenant Jean-José. It will be easier to speak of him in this way when I write.

His charming devotion to his wife and to his little boy make him indulgent of my heart's preoccupations. With him I shall be able to talk of you and of my father.

Tuesday, *August* 4, 1914.

My day has been a full one. I had to clothe my men, arm them, distribute the cartridges and other stuff, the dishes, the kettles, the food.

I have worked without ceasing, urging on my sergeants and my corporals. All this can be told in a line, but it has filled sixteen hours.

My men need seriously to be taken in hand. Individually they are all ardor, all aflame; but they don't hang together. It is so long since they have served as soldiers that they need discipline. I shall try to work them into shape.

If you could see me, my Helen, you would not recognize your cotillion partner of last winter. In the first place, I am very dirty, having almost no time to devote to my toilet, and then I have handled so much metal, so many boots, that my hands are quite impossible. I scold, I try to be ferocious, terrifying. But these are habits which I shall not always keep, I promise you.

August 5, 1914.

We know now what we are going to do in the East to begin with. We shall form a part of the mobile defence of a fortress — a celebrated bishopric — which no doubt played an important part in your composition on the history of France when you were given good marks.

I assembled my men at seven o'clock. I made them perform one or two exercises. Things are not going badly.

For the last two days we have been helped by the young girls and women who, unceasingly, have been stitching on insignias, mending our trousers, putting numbers on our sacks. The men were enchanted.

This morning the girls brought us flowers. The men put them on their rifles, on their caps. The whole company was decorated with enormous daisies and dahlias. The train went off covered with branches.

They must become laurel branches!

August 6, 1914.

We are waiting the order which will summon us nearer the front, and it looks as though we might have to curb our impatience for eight or ten days more. It is exasperating. Forgive me for confessing it, but you understand, don't you? what I feel.

I don't risk anything more by going into battle now than in a fortnight, and this delay is so tiresome. We cannot leave the barracks, as the order to move on may arrive at any moment. One grows irritable doing nothing.

My men will be in condition in about two or three days; they could be ready now. They already respond very well to all I ask.

The other morning our flag was presented to us. It is its first appearance, as our regiment has only just been formed, and as yet, naturally, it has not been christened by any victories. It is good to think that, if we are able, we shall inscribe the first names on this silk.

I talk of you with my orderly, a fine fellow, quite clever, and who was to have been married on Saturday. He can understand me.

I long to go to battle soon so that I may come back to you soon.

August 7, 1914.

We are still safe. We sleep in villages where one does not always find a post-office.

I am obliged to look out for my men, their food, their poor feet. They are a good lot and they have confidence in me. They know that I have been engaged for a month and they are devoted to me already.

Yesterday we were quartered in a charming village, in the hollow of a valley, where a tiny river winds its way. Jean-José and I carried our canteens to a field and there we took a bath in the stream. It was delightful. In the evening I walked out in the village, for my service first, as I was on duty, and then for my pleasure, as this little town, sleeping, with our fires aglow in the open air and the full moon which rose in the sky, was really beautiful. I went for a moment into the church. There were three old women kneeling in the dim candlelight. I said a prayer for us.

The country is marvellous. Flowers everywhere and of all descriptions: bluets, enormous daisies, digitalis, morning-glories.

I send you a wild carnation which this morning, by the roadside, I picked for you.

August 13, 1914.

To-day I received four letters from you. My orderly brought them to me triumphantly. Like the others in my company he knows from whom they come, and he is delighted to hand them to me.

The other morning the major reviewed our battalion; our company was congratulated for its good bearing. We were the only ones complimented. This does n't seem much, judged from afar; yet here, with the sun so exhausting, the difficulties of obtaining sufficient water, the absence of all resources, it is a most complicated matter to make the men keep their shoes clean, with the buttons sewed on.

Last year when I went to serve my twenty-three days, I still felt as though I were masquerading in my uniform. To-day nothing remains in my surroundings to remind me of what I used to be. Thus, for example, this morning I had my sword sharpened for the second time. One of the men held it on the grindstone until it was able to cut marvellously well; he finished the blade off like a needle-point. As a matter of fact my best arms are my men. I want them to follow me, and they are all determined to do so. They declare to me that I shall return to marry you, and I know that in the hour of danger they will not fail me.

August 15, 1914.

I shall not have the joy of going into battle on my twenty-seventh birthday.

This letter will reach you long after the 15th of August; it will tell you that on that day I was thinking of you, — no more than usual, but with greater reverence. It used to be a day of rejoicing at home, because of my mother, of Marie-Rose, and myself. My father used to spoil us so.

I think of all these dear ones whom I have loved and whom I love. In memory of them, and of you, I would like to have done something brilliant to-day. But here we still are.

Don't think that we are considered as useless; we are ready. We are being kept here in order to be moved to the spot where we can be most useful when we have our first clash with the enemy.

We shall triumph because of your prayers.

Dearest! may I ask you a favor?

The 23d of August is the anniversary of my brother's death. My mother used always to have a Mass said for him on that day, and I did the same when she was no longer here. You know how much I loved my brother Guy. He was charming. I am sure you would have loved him, too. You will make me very happy, if, on the 23d of August, you pray for him as well as for me.

This birthday of mine has been rather dull. We got up at three this morning to lead our men up to the place where they are digging trenches. We are working in all haste now because we expect soon a big battle in the North.

This morning I was thinking of you, following you in every act. You got up early, went to Mass. I saw all this in the blue sky, for the plain where we are camping overlooks the valley of the Moselle, and the horizon is far, far away.

Yes, my little Helen, I shall commend myself to God when I am under the enemy's fire for the first time. I shall think of you then. I don't feel like the somewhat cowardly person who is converted because "One can never tell what may happen!" No, I have already spoken to you of this. I have faith, and it seems to me that if ever our lives are in the keeping of God, it must be at such times as these I am traversing. I have always prayed in the solemn moments of my life and I shall continue to do so now.

This evening — for your sake — I have tried to make myself look as well as possible. That is to say I have scrubbed myself from head to foot, and, after shaving, I have put some powder on my face. It is the first time such a thing has happened, I can assure you. I perfumed my handkerchief with your perfume and I gave an extra touch to my mustache.

Jean-José giggled with glee.

August 18, 1914.

My beloved:

Fear not! I am leaving now after fourteen days of preparation. I know my men thoroughly; I can rely on them. This is great good luck. I am very calm and I am thoroughly acquainted with my service. Perhaps we shall not be in actual fighting for a few days still. All this is the fortune of war.

Excuse me if I say to you, so frankly, that I am happy. At last I shall be able to do something. It is an unheard-of joy that I should be able to fight for you.

Dearest, you can do as much for me — more even than I can do for you. You can pray for me and protect me by your love. Knowing that my dead are watching over me and that you are entrusting me to God, I go in peace.

August 19, 1914.

We have advanced slightly to the north. We are now about fifteen kilomètres from the first line of the German trenches. Daily we pay honor to our flag — a touching ceremony.

I still have a bed to sleep in, in the home of an old couple, childless, and unfortunately very cross, the woman especially. But, in such cases, one always fares better in the end than when one meets at first with a good welcome. As a matter of fact, after I have asked politely for a table, some water, some cooking-utensils, and have been refused them, I proceed to help myself without further ceremony; this right of commandeering is one of the chief advantages of war. You see, dearest, I am not always the over-polite young man whom you used rather to make fun of. But my men are not given to destroying things. I am very severe on this point. I want them to behave *courteously*, respectfully.

August 26, 1914.

Still nothing serious to report. To be on the front here is quite restful. The village is strongly entrenched and it commands the plain for a great distance. "They" will not pass this way.

I am making myself a coat. I discovered in my company a tailor who is able to execute such a garment with a soldier's hood. We have taken the buttons and the lining from an old dolman; we have ripped from two caps some stiff linen for the collar. With some gold braid found in a work-box this man is going to make me the regiment numbers.

It amuses me to have this coat put together, haphazard, with such materials as we could find by the way.

The moon no longer shines, and it grows dark early. When I am out for night service I look up at the stars and the sky, which you may be gazing at too. These nights of absolute silence are impressive when we have extinguished our fires, so that they may not betray our presence, and when we hear the "Who goes there?" of the sentinels as they proceed on their rounds.

It is all so beautiful, and perhaps for that very reason I feel a great loneliness.

Of course I cannot really wish that you were here with me. You would be too uncomfortable and I cannot imagine you here among all these men. . . . But, how I long for your apparition . . . !"

August 27, 1914.

If you knew what good your letters do me! When things begin to weigh heavily I say to myself: "Helen loves me!" — and I take a fresh start.

Constantly during the day I kiss your watch. I think my men must have noticed this. They speak to me often of you — "the lieutenant's fiancée!" When one of them becomes sullen or homesick I generally hear this remark being addressed to him by a comrade: "Don't you suppose the lieutenant would rather be with his fiancée than here?"

And that ends the discussion.

We lead a life in general which absorbs all our energies. Only one things haunts us — the memory of a kiss! It lingers in the mind like the caress of one soul for another. . . . As such I bring it to you.

August 29, 1914.

I beg of you to go on doing things as though I were there, so that I may know just how to think of you, and so that when

I return at last to your side, I shall find the same Helen I left a month ago. When I give orders to my men I want them to be executed as though you were there to see all that they do. When some good idea comes into my head I am as proud of it as though you were able to give me your approbation. . . . Thus you are a part of all I do.

Last night I slept in the bedroom of a little child who had left her dolls there — an Alsatian, with the big bow, a cradle full of dollies. It made an amusing contrast with myself, in my uniform, on the bed.

These homes into which one casts a glance are interesting. They reveal something of the life of these people whom one sees only once in passing. Generally we are given the best room full of all the particular treasures: the wreath of orange blossom, the photographs of bridal pairs, gilded vases, boxes, and a profusion of plush and imitation tortoise-shell; lots of holy pictures and statuettes and rosaries. They seem to have kept something of the spirit of Jeanne d' Arc. . . .

August 30, 1914.

This morning I took a delightful walk. We call it a patrol. I set out at three o'clock with six soldiers and a corporal. We tramped over the fields and through the woods, beyond the farthest outposts, to see if "they" are approaching.

We go always at dawn, for it is at sunrise that the German cavalry scouts are in search of us. It was charming, but we had no success. The pine trees, the thyme, and the hay smelt wonderfully good. We went through the outposts; we passed the line of sentinels, who asked for the watchword. And then the chase began! It was very amusing. There was a mist and we started up first the night birds, then the partridges. The sun rose and we got back at about five o'clock with the sound of the first church bells ringing the early Mass.

All the time I was thinking of you, my beloved little fiancée. In the sky there were mauves, and blues, and greys which you would have loved. About us, and behind us, my six good men were acting as your guard.

. . . I shall give myself, heart and soul, I shall give myself, for my country and for you. You make one in my heart. But when I shall have done all I can, then I shall try to return.

August 31, 1914.

We are very much occupied just now. My company has been detailed to different outposts at a certain distance from the battlefield. They are set to guard all the ways of escape, to patrol, inside and outside of the lines. We sleep without undressing and armed. This has been going on for three days. It might be fatiguing, but it is really amusing. I am wonderfully well, absolutely well.

We are free to decide who may live and who must die in this village, but we don't abuse our rights. The inhabitants have grown accustomed to us and they do all they can for us. They give us eggs, milk, fruit, for the place is fairly large and there are still some chickens left, and some cows.

I keep on perfecting my men's appearance. As I had no number-badges for my new regiment, — a fact which annoyed the colonel every time we encountered him, — I decided to make some myself. A girl in the village who knows how to embroider accomplished this miracle with some ravellings of gold braid. I had been given to understand that this young person was an artist. The charge for her work was six sous, and that was quite sufficient payment. She managed to create for my cap, my coat, and my dolman, three cubist figures which have a great deal of local color. At least I now wear the number of my regiment.

Your ribbon has never left my arm. You will untie it when I come back. I send you two flowers in your favorite colors which I picked this morning. The four-leafed clover — or what I shall ask you to consider as such — was given to me for you, tied up as you see it, by one of my men. I promised to send it to you from him.

Postal card.
(*The date has been scratched out.*)

I am well, perfectly well. Not the slightest trace of fatigue, and our spirits are excellent. I am thinking of you all the time and I hope that you are not anxious. We are going to drive them back surely and I shall return to you. Have no fear of it. I am thinking of you; I love you! The days are splendid and the nights very fine. Last night the street — of which I enclose a picture — was full of the camp-fires of our soldiers, and above was the moon enveloping all in its light.

I love you! I hope that I may be allowed to say this on a postal card without its being held up! I am thinking of you. I keep everything that comes to me from you. Your watch goes well. I depend entirely upon it and I nurse it as though it were a little bit of you.

I send you my deep, all my deep, great tenderness.

September 8, 1914.

My beloved:

There has been a hole in my letters. There is none in my skin, and so you will be happy, though you have n't heard from me.

Yesterday we passed through Nancy. It was extraordinary. Every one was so pleased with the work we have been doing the last few days that they could n't make enough of us. One lady was distributing postal cards which she collected afterwards to mail for us. I scratched off two words to you. A young man took our pictures; he promised to send you the proofs. Jean-José declares that if you can stand this likeness of me it is a proof of your love.

I must tell you that we had been five days without our baggage, — two nights in the trenches, — and that we had come a long way in the sun and in the dust. We were very dirty; but you see I am whole.

At night, on our plain, I prayed for you; I thought of you as I looked at the moon. It was so beautiful. Fancy the terrace of Saint-Germain, only longer, and stretching out before one the fields of Lorraine beyond, extending to Lunéville.

In this valley they had wickedly set fire to five villages which we saw in flames. They were bombarding in every direction, taking poor aim, as they did not bring down a single church steeple, though they tried hard enough.

I was thinking of you.

Do you know that picture in the moon which is known as the "kiss"? It was there so clearly those two nights and I never grew tired of looking at it.

September 14, 1914.

I send you a flower which I picked this afternoon on land that we have taken from them. I kissed it and kissed it again. I wanted you to find on it the trace of my love!

It was delightful to feel one's self advancing on ground that they had been obliged to abandon. They retreated suddenly and to a great distance, and they were greater in numbers than we. But they fled just the same.

I have lived through interesting days and your picture has protected me. You know that I kiss it every night in the dark. It was exceedingly complicated, because I had to unfasten my coat in the rain, but I would not have missed it for anything in the world.

I told you that once when I received one of your letters in the firing-line, a quarter of an hour before an attack, I leaned up against a tree in order to read in peace what you had written. Don't think I was afraid. I handed the command over to my sergeant and stood under cover only in order not to miss a word from you. I took up my post at once; the tree, indeed, had served rather to keep my men from seeing me than the shells from striking me.

While we were stationed in the woods, as we had no more water, idiotic as it may seem, in spite of the constant rain, I was entrusted with a reconnaissance in one of the three villages just beyond us, a village in which the enemy was getting provisions.

A reconnaissance of this sort is very amusing. I set out with ten well-picked men. We were followed by a dozen others, armed, of course, but carrying a collection of bottles and buckets. We crept along quietly, entering the gardens by the back.

There happened to be no Germans there, at the time, which was less amusing. But it delighted us to see the heads of the inhabitants looking wildly out and to notice the change of expression on those unhappy faces when they perceived our red trousers. We were so glad to be able to say to them: "Don't be afraid! We promise you that they shall not return."

We took the water and these poor people gave us everything they could spare: eggs, milk, a little piece of butter, and the last bottle of white wine in the village, which an old man went and hunted up for us. They would not let me pay for anything. They were amazed that I did not let my men pick any of their fruit. We carried off our treasures in our caps. I left a picket on guard, above the village, at the entrance of the woods, and the enemy has not returned since.

To-day I went to see one of their batteries which has been hailing shells on us for two days past, and which we succeeded at last in smashing. I will try to bring you back one of the shell baskets as a souvenir. It would do very well to hang on a carriage, for umbrellas.

What brutes these Germans are! If you could see the state the villages are in when we reach them after they have just retreated. They have not had time to set fire to them, or else they have not dared to do so, fearing reprisals. But they have broken everything to bits. The inhabitants tell us horrible stories which are only too true. On their disgusting pointed helmets, on their belts, on all the things we find abandoned, and on their dead, they have inscribed everywhere the words: "*Gott mit uns*" (God is with us).

In this sad little village they have none the less pillaged the church and installed in it their stables. It is a sorry sight to see:

there is straw on the ground, — in what state you can best imagine, — the statues have been overturned and broken, the altar is upside down, the flowers are strewn before it, they have taken the priests' robes and mantles to cover their horses, the sacristy is full of empty bottles!

I don't believe there is another people in the world capable of acting in such a manner. We are rejoicing in proportion, to be regaining the ground from which this scum is forced to retire. And also I say to myself that it means drawing nearer to the moment when I shall be with you again.

I have been covered with mud for days, and in fact we are all in the same condition. My men look like bandits. Our clothes, our leather, our arms, are very much the proper color. It is all very picturesque, but not exactly elegant.

The other day, as we were passing through Saint-Mihiel, I purchased a delightful little muffler, violet and chocolate. It is having a great success, for one of the essentials of war is to modify a soldier's uniform. We try to keep as warm as possible, as we are out of doors all the time. We are preparing for the winter nights.

I was to have spent these September days with you at Fontainebleau. I am thinking of this constantly, and I am so glad that "they" did not get as far as that. We shall find everything just as we left it there.

September 17, 1914.

Yesterday, dearest, we were in contact with them, through our scouts. To-day they have disappeared. We are in the woods, on the edge of a plateau which overlooks the plain of the Woevre. In the far distance we can see the forts of Metz.

The village is enchanting, with its old church and fourteenth-century cloister perched on the cliff. Beneath us, as far as the eye can reach, the plain and the forest are stretched out. This is the way which they follow stealthily to reach our frontier.

We are installed in huts left by the Germans, and it is amusing to think of their having made them. The men have trimmed them up in great style and our nigger village would delight you. Jean-José, the captain, and I have chosen a round hut which has quite the form of an Indian chief's wigwam. It is comfortable. Outside there is as much confusion as when Cyrano was before Arras.

I have made a stool out of some branches. Jean-José has a similar seat, and together we play écarté on a drum. Just now we had our tea in Russian style, with slices of lemon, and some bread toasted before the fire on a bayonet: all in the face of the enemy. Is n't that rather smart? Unfortunately, the enemy is quite heart-breaking; he systematically refuses to fight and keeps falling back without firing a shot. Now and then we manage to seize a belated patrol, but to beat them we must follow them into their own ground.

Dearest, the rain has succeeded in making its way into our cabin. I have had to come nearer to the light and now the page I am writing you is very dirty. Will you excuse it? I have not time to begin again.

I talk of you all the time with Jean-José, who is really a delightful companion. We play cards when we have nothing else to do. First we played for champagne. We gave that up, as we never could find the champagne to pay our debts. Then we played our turn to fight; the winner was to be the first in battle. But that was too boring for the loser.

I have just lost a rubber: a dinner which I am to give for you, and Jean-José and his wife, when I come back. Just now we are gambling for our supper; it amuses us.

One of the men has just brought me a sketch of our hut. The person with his back turned is I, deep in conversation, before our tea. The same fellow, who is a sculptor, has promised to make a drawing which I will send to you.

Heavens! How far away you seem. You could n't bear the muddy creature I am now.

September 19, 1914.

We are resting just now in a village, Jean-José and I. We shall sleep in the same bed, in the home of a kind old woman. We have sent our orderlies to sleep in a barn and we have made a splendid fire to dry ourselves by. I break the wood; Jean-José blows through an iron tube, which they use in this part of the world, instead of a bellows. It is idyllic!

I will let you know to-morrow if we have had pleasant dreams.

September 20, 1914.

It is four o'clock in the morning. We have just been wakened with a start. We must be off at five. We are to descend into the plain and wait there for orders. If they are what I hope they will be, dearest, the moment I have so longed for is near. Do not be anxious. I will come back to you.

Such love as ours is bound to endure.

XV

This afternoon, at Versailles, we closed our meeting of the County Councillors. One of my colleagues brought me back to Paris in his motor.

It is only six o'clock, so I decide to stop at my office before dinner to see if there is any news. My office is empty. The maps of the État-Major are laid out for my evening task, the last mail is on the table in its usual place.

Before I have had time to sit down my attention is drawn to two letters which both look alike, in official envelopes, unsealed, without stamps, addressed hastily and by the same hand. A postal card from the armies protrudes from under them.

It is not my boy's writing on this card, but his signature is at the bottom. He has dictated the following:

Military Hospital, Alpha,
Saturday, September 26, 1914.

My dear Father:

I have been wounded in the arm, but that is nothing. Another bullet passed through my lungs; the spine is bad. This is tiresome, for my legs are paralyzed. But they tell me that, as the wound is a clean one, I shall recover. It will take time. That is all.

I am able to write to you owing to the kindness of Mr. N——, one of the officials of this hospital.

Beneath, the signature unsteady.

He is not dead!

Let us look at the letters.

I chance to fall upon the one which he tenderly hoped I might read first.

I don't know the name of the military doctor who signed it.

This letter was written on the outskirts of the battlefield a short time after my boy had been picked up:

September 23, 1914.
(*No place indicated.*)

My dear Sir:

I am writing to you at the request of your son, seriously wounded in the chest yesterday morning. His wound, however, is not mortal; it will be a question of time and of care. He is at present in an ambulance and he will probably be moved on in a few days. He is under the care of a good surgeon and he wants for nothing.

LOUIS P——
(*Doctor of the 1st class.*)

"The wound is not mortal . . ." "He will probably be moved . . . "

Is this true? Then why the second letter?

I open it; it bears the same date as the first.

Sir:

Just now I wrote to you by your son's bedside, almost under his dictation, a letter which could leave you a certain amount of hope. To be sincere I must deny what

I have said. I would not do so, as I do not wish to be the first to bring you such bad news, but it would not be loyal on my part to leave you under the impression of a message which you had the right to suppose sincere.

Your son bears with great courage such a wound as his is. His only thought is for his family.

Please, sir, let me send you my affectionate sympathy for your grief as a father at such a time, and, may I add, my cordial admiration for your son.

LOUIS P——

It is the death decree . . . !

Thank you, both of you, thank you. You, a stranger, who with such fraternal pity have taken the time to write me the truth, and you, my son, who have lied to me.

The card and the two letters are there open on the table. I don't need to read them again. I don't wring my hands, I don't cry out, "My God!" I am waiting for that feeling of emptiness to leave my head. My other boy and his mother I have followed to the grave, but an instant ago I still had a son. Now he has fallen beside the others! It takes a moment for me to steady myself under the shock.

I must go and tell my colleagues.

In the editing-rooms downstairs, I show them the postal card.

"This is the letter of a hero!"

"And this one?"

I read it aloud to them.

I don't know exactly what I shall do. I think I shall go up and write my article. Tenderly, a hand is laid on my shoulder; a voice says: "You are going to your boy!"

I look at the comrade who has spoken these words as though it depended on him to dispel the difficulties which bar the way. Not that I am not longing, my child, to be near you, while you live, or if you are gone; but just now I seem to have no individual existence, to be only the reflex of my father and his forefathers. Sea-men, all of them, they put duty above everything else: a rigid discipline. It has been so generally understood, I myself have explained to so many unfortunate parents, that, when our sons fall on the battlefield, it is impossible to go to them. I can't believe that such a favor is to be granted me.

Some one says: "Yes! yes! There is a train from the Gare de l'Est at half-past eight. . . . Of course you must have a permit from the Governor of Paris. . . . Hurry and find him. . . . If you are in luck you should be able to leave to-night."

I start at those words . . . "If you are in luck! . . . in luck!"

How kind they are. How eager to help me. The attendants are standing near the door. . . . They look at me and bow as I go. I thank them and say: "Why, it is raining!"

I am still in the vestibule under cover. It is not rain, but a cold perspiration that wets my brow . . . my hands.

XVI

I AM in luck.

The Governor receives me at once.

"General," I say to him, "when I came to see you two weeks ago, you said to me: 'One thing alone is of consequence: that we give ourselves, all we have, and all we love.' — It is done. My son has been mortally wounded!"

"My poor friend!"

I felt a sob in my throat as he said this, holding out his hand to me, this chief, so emaciated that he seems more like a thought than a body in action.

"Where did your son fall?" he asks.

I name the place, yonder, so far away in Lorraine. . . .

He answers: "All depends on General Headquarters. I shall do what is necessary . . . the best will be a laisser-passer for a motor. . . . But you can't possibly have it before to-morrow. . . Try in any case to leave by train."

I am in luck.

At the station I show my letters to the officials. They allow me to take the train. I don't attempt to look out of the window to see what ravages the enemy may have made in the regions we are passing through. . . . I am looking within . . . looking for my child.

I cannot even ask myself, "Is he going to live?" — but only, "Will he be still alive?" . . . "Shall I find him still on his bed? . . . On his bed, his eyes closed, his hands clasped. . . . !"

How I long to see him one last time.

XVII

Though I have been in all parts of the world, I happen never to have visited this historic town. Yet it plays a great part in our imaginations from the time we are children.

When I was a schoolboy it used to appear to me like one of the pillars of the gigantic portal which defends our native land. It seemed to tower above the dark shadow which our schoolmasters, after the War of 1870, used to spread over Alsace-Lorraine. I used to long to be among the soldiers who, one day, would tear away this veil of crape which had covered the face of France.

Ah! if, in those days, some one had said to me: "This glory is reserved for your son, but you will shroud him in Victory . . . "

We are not far off now. I can distinguish the town: rows of trees which descend abruptly into the moats full of water, tiled roofs, crowded under shelter of the cathedral, and, at a little distance beyond, on an elevation, the hospital. I recognize it, for my boy had described it in one of his first letters.

He was quartered at that time in the barracks which I can see yonder at the foot of the hill. His companions, like himself, were preparing for action. Now he has mounted to the top of the hill, he lies there on his back, his face turned heavenward, side by side with those whose campaign is ended.

"O God! Grant that I may see my son, a last time!"

XVIII

The major in command of the railroad station offers me his automobile. We cross the town like the wind; we speed past a poor little chapel outside the walls, a façade of pasteboard decorated with a cluster of flags. Before the open door some soldiers are bearing a coffin.

"Can it be Robert?"

No! They tell me it is not he, so, forward, on the way.

The chauffeur, who notices my emotion, speaks to me gently. He is a young Lorraine priest. The day before yesterday his native village was bombarded while his parents were in the presbytery. Since then he has had no news from them.

He says to me: "I am praying for them! I shall pray for your son."

It is the last turning in the road. Here is the iron grating before the hospital, and the picket who guards it. At the back of the garden stands a tall building. A clock strikes the quarter-hours, heard by those who lie on their beds, dying.

I am shown to the office of the director, who had been kind enough to write to me. I can hear his step approaching.

He is charming, this unknown friend, with his little *bonnet de police*, his smile, half-hidden by a beard touched with gold.

He says to me: "Take heart. You shall see him."

"Will he be able to know me?" I ask.

"I left him only an hour ago," he answers. "He did not imagine you were so near. How glad he will be to see you."

The director wants me to stop a moment in his office to rest, to compose myself. I must not go into the sick-room looking as I do.

I obey.

On the desk are piled up death certificates. I can look at them calmly now. I know that his name is not on the lists.

How ungrateful we are. I know that he is living, that he will be able to speak to me, and already I hunger for a greater joy.

I ask, with a feeling of shame: "Is there no hope?"

The handsome director, no longer smiling, answers evasively: "You know what his wound is . . .!"

I know. If by some miracle his heart were to go on beating for several years more, he would be, from his hips to his toes, like one already dead. He does not deserve such torture.

I close my eyes. I summon all my courage. I must not be a coward.

We can go now to see him.

In the narrow hallway, the second room to the right is his. Between us there is only a door to separate us now. The director passes in front of me, to tell him that I am there. But I cannot wait. I follow him.

Opposite me, near the window, stands an empty bed. To the right, in the corner, another bed.

He is there. His face is toward the wall.

Hearing the director's voice, he turns slowly. He sees us both. He lifts his eyelids and his lips move. He speaks: "You? How good of you to come . . ."

"My boy!"

The director has vanished. I see my child. I touch him. We are together.

XIX

He had stood by my side when I closed his brother's eyes, and his mother's. He knows what it is to clasp to one's heart a lifeless form.

He tries to put his arms around my neck. The effort is too much for him. The time has passed now, when he can give this sort of proof of his affection to those he loves here below.

Does he know that through his rough hospital shirt I can feel his arms, his strong arms which were my pride, withered now and stiff already?

He looks at me with such depths of gravity in his eyes!

"Robert, my boy! What an honor you are to us."

He does not answer. He sees that my lowered eyes are fixed upon his hands, stretched out on the sheet.

Suddenly, as though he were rising from

the shadows of some nightmare, he says: "It does n't mean an invalid's chair."

And he smiles. He smiles as he did on the threshold of his house in the Rue de Rivoli when we parted and he said to me: "You know that I shall do my duty, and a little more, if I have the chance."

Oh! my child, I dare not question you. "What do you mean? . . . 'It won't be an invalid's chair'?"

Was it a word of hope that escaped your poor, pale lips? Of hope, in your misery!

Do you believe that you will be able, some day, to rise again from this bed? That you will be able to walk as other men, elated by your young love? Or was it an expression of resignation, of irony, at your own fate?

I know you, and your generous soul; you spoke thinking of me only. You want me to say to myself: "Our lot might have been worse. In this condition he might have survived."

XX

THE director, with his golden beard, comes to get me, so that I may go with him to see the head doctor.

Behind this other desk, where life and death are administered, I find another friend.

Thirty years of life in the colonies has prepared him for the fortunes of war. His experiences have made him human. A Breton by race, he has the sailor's temperament and seems more like a seafaring man than a practicing physician.

I feel as though I were on the bridge of a ship. He has endured long absences in far-away posts where he dreamed of a distant home. In the misery of such loneliness he has known what it is to love. And so he can imagine how heart-breaking this final separation is.

His fraternal kindness, I feel, will make my way easier.

"Your son?" he asks. "Have you seen him? He is what I call a hero. There are many brave men on the battlefield, but when they are brought here there is a letting-down. He knows exactly his case, yet he has never shown any sign of weakness. When the Governor of the town came to see me, I said to him, 'I have a lieutenant here who was plucky under fire and who is turning a brave face now toward death!' The Governor asked to see your son. He complimented him on his conduct. It pleased the lieutenant."

"It pleases me too," I say.

He nods approval and asks: "Are you going to remain?"

"If I only could . . ."

"It is contrary to all rules. . . . But you are a Colonial, you can get on with little and be satisfied. You can share pot-luck with us. We shall have a bed put up for you."

And as this man is too loyal to disguise the truth he adds: "No, no. You won't be imposing upon us, for, alas, your stay here will not be a long one. We can't nourish the lieutenant, nor even quench his thirst. Everything we give him is useless. He will hold out to the end of his strength. And he was strong. Well, I shall see you to-night at dinner."

Across his desk he holds out his hand.

XXI

It is my next duty to become acquainted with the head nurse.

The director says to me: "It is she who manages this whole lower floor. She is a remarkable woman. Her hands are tender, when she touches all these poor sufferers, and yet she is astonishingly powerful. The wounded call for her when they need to be lifted up out of their beds. Your son likes her and they say that she is especially good to him."

I enter the place where the orderlies are preparing all that is needed for their patients, and where they wash the soiled linen. They rub and scrub, they weigh things, and heat others, and call and discuss.

A woman's voice, urging them to make haste, quiets this confusion.

It is the head nurse. I look at her with emotion. Opposite me, in the last terrible moments, she will stand by my child's bedside; a woman of France. She will take the mother's place, the place of the sister who cannot be here, of the fiancée whom he will not see again.

The first encounter with this professional of suffering is rather brusque. She devotes herself valiantly and zealously to the wounded; she has no time to waste with the parents. I understand that. I thank her and ask: "You perhaps have some one fighting yourself?"

Without lifting her eyes from some liquid she is straining, she answers: "My only son. I am without news. So is everybody, for that matter. I don't let it affect me. What would become of us here if we gave up to our feelings?"

She asks this question so roughly, with such bravado, that I know she is n't heartless in reality. So I kiss one of her poor hands, so ready to help those who need her in their suffering.

Such things are unheard of here. She is astonished. She lets me see that she is a woman and a mother:

"My son?" she says. "It seems to me I am touching him when I lift one of them. Yours is very fine. He is a martyr. No one ever hears him complain. He is still so particular about how he looks. While you were with the head doctor he called me. He wanted me to tidy him up, on account of you, I suppose."

XXII

I HAVE to pass through the principal ward to reach my child. There are men here who can go no farther. Many of them are merely waiting the end. They know that they are still living only because of their suffering.

Their iron bedsteads are lined up to the right and to the left, the heads against the windows, the feet toward us. The white sheets, the rough grey blankets, seem an emblem of the union here of care and of misery.

Some of these poor men's heads are completely hidden by the bandages from under which the eyes gaze, dark, fixed circles. Some have drawn the sheets over them like a shroud; some sleep, their mouths open; some hold out for bandaging a cavity, grey on the edges; some are drifting away; some are beyond recall.

I feel ashamed to go through this place of suffering without stopping, without speaking to any one, as though I were indifferent to the agony of others, as though I did not feel in the air, heavier than this atmosphere of fever, the weight of their thoughts.

XXIII

FROM what depths has this childhood's memory risen?

As I came into your ward, my boy, I remembered the long-ago days, when, after the birth of a new little brother, my mother used to send for us. She was so fresh then, my mother, my aged mother, who happily is not alive to-day. So sweet, in her snowy bed, with a touch of pink in her cheeks.

This military hospital has outdone itself for you, my boy. They have given you a better place. You are no longer in the shadow of a wall. Your bed stands near the window now. At least my presence has served to bring you, in your last hours, nearer to the light.

When you see me your whole face becomes radiant, and in spite of all the bonds that are loosening, so many things seem to live again in your smile that I feel you have never left us to go to war, that you have not been wounded, that you are not a hero, that you are not going to die. So I come in again, just as I used of old when you were a schoolboy: "Robert!" I say, "it is late. You must get up."

I lean against the foot of your bed, directly opposite you, for it wearies you to turn your head, and I can see you better this way.

My eyes cannot look enough at you.

Your beard has grown. I have known you always with a mustache only, such as I wear myself. Your beard is of a warm color, the same Italian brown as your mother's hair, which in her youth was touched with gold when she stood in the sunlight.

"It is becoming to you, this beard, my boy; you must wear it always."

He looks at me with a pity which seems to enfold us both; but he does not protest. Neither of us is deceived; but in the depths of the tenderness that binds us together there is a certain chivalry which defies disaster.

Agreed, my boy. The contract is signed

by a glance, and we shall keep it unflinchingly. Neither you nor I can tell how many days, how many hours, are left us to be together. We shall live as though we did not know the decree is signed, as though I were waiting here until you get strong enough for me to take you home.

XXIV

YESTERDAY he was too tired, after the excitement of seeing me, to talk with me as he is so eager to do about the things I want so much to hear.

He will tell me his story in the moments of respite which the morphine affords him.

He said to me, almost abruptly as though giving an order — it is hard for him to speak, and I must respond at once: "Sit down beside me!"

Then he began the story which is to be as his testament:

"If the notebook in which I used to write every day should ever be returned to you, you will see that my diary comes to an end on September 20, 1914. So I shall tell you, now, what happened during my last three days.

"On that Sunday, the 20th, we had left our shelter by five in the morning. The wind blew, the rain beat down furiously. The men were digging trenches to the north. We came down into the plain to await orders. These were not long in reaching us. We were informed that there was an engagement started in the neighborhood and that we were to take part in it.

"I was elated, as was every one. But my satisfaction was to be of short duration. At the very moment when our battalion was to advance toward the cannon's mouth, I received orders to join the artillery with my section.

"The battery that we were to guard was placed in a hollow of the valley and very cleverly concealed there. Its aim was directed on an important village, held by the enemy, just opposite us. We watched the firing with envy, my men and I, for our regiment was fighting before our eyes. They had been called upon to reinforce another regiment of infantry who were attacking the village.

"As consolation, I said to myself: 'Suppose they take the village without you?

The war won't be over for that. You will have other chances to fight.'

"I listened to this reasoning with one ear, and with the other I heard the cannon; so that I was consoled without being consoled.

"Toward noon, a dense smoke and smothered flames broke out in the village. Our cannon had done good work. We were about to redouble the dose of shell when I saw a soldier running toward us. He was gesticulating as he approached. It was one of Jean-José's men.

"Within earshot he called out: 'Stop fire! Our troops are in possession of the village.'

"A shiver ran down our spines, for, in such a case, one is never sure that one has n't fired a few bullets too many.

"I received orders to join our battalion at nine that night. To do so we had to cross over part of the field where the fighting had taken place during the day.

"I remembered having read in certain war stories these words: 'We walked on the wounded and on the dead.' I realized that night their true meaning, all the more agonizing because we could not stop to answer those poor creatures who were calling us as we passed. I had received strict orders: 'Rally as quickly as possible, by the shortest way.'

"It was ten o'clock when we entered the burning village. We were to quarter there, in the buildings saved from the flames.

"I had just knocked on the door of a barn where I intended to install my section, when I had the pleasure of running across my comrade, Lieutenant Jean-José.

"He and his men had had a trying time getting across the hilltop, but they had come through unscathed. I longed to hear the details of their encounter, but Jean-José, who had been rather hard hit, was too worn out to answer my questions.

"Together we went into a deserted house. A neighbor sold us some jam and a bottle of wine. We dragged a mattress out in front of the fire and there we went to sleep. Not for long, however. At three o'clock in the morning — that was Monday, the 21st — we were already up and under way in the pitchy darkness. At dawn our colonel assembled us in the clearing of a wood. He addressed a few words to us. He said he was satisfied with the way our regiment had conducted itself the day before. We must expect that to-day and to-morrow things would be hotter. He spoke to us from his horse, concluding: 'We shall get them, if it means that three quarters of us fall in the effort. Vive la France!'

"His address made an excellent impression. We wrapped ourselves up in our cloaks and tried to sleep in spite of the rain which fell heavily, and the enemy's bombarding.

"That day of the 21st of September seemed long to me. I was apprehensive for the morrow. I had been invoking this encounter for weeks, but things were not occurring as I had imagined they would.

"When, at evening, before a camp-fire, I had dreamed of my chance to receive the true 'baptism of fire,' the whole adventure was enveloped in an atmosphere of heroism. I supposed I should be facing an enemy superior perhaps in numbers, and who would attack us boldly; that we would wait for them and break their force as we met in hand-to-hand combat. We would drive them back, putting them to flight. Of course all this would give a splendid chance for each of us to do something remarkable — and the whole encounter would take place in the broad sunlight.

"The chance offered us in reality presented a very different aspect. Our men, drenched with the rain, heavy with lack of sleep, realized they were not going to fight on fresh ground. They had been called to help out the comrades who had been obliged to yield in the same spot! The wounded who were being carried back through the village, said: 'We are retreating. There are too many of them.'

"Well, I can say this to you: I have always been superstitious! It was during the night of a 22d to a 23d that our Guy left us forever.

"At the end of the day, they did not hide from us that we had not been successful.

We received an order to occupy the trenches at our right. The command was clear. We were to protect, as they fell back, those of our own men who were retreating. In case the Germans should attempt to pursue them, we were given orders to resist them as long as we could hold out.

"The rain had transformed the trenches into a swamp. The water was up to the calves of our legs, and what grieved us more was the procession of litters carried past us as the wounded were brought down from the firing-line.

"I drew near to Jean-José to munch a crust with him. Conversation languished. Our teeth were chattering with cold and we had no way of warming ourselves. So we saw that Tuesday, the 22d, dawn.

"Toward one in the morning, the colonel decided that the enemy would attempt no further advance in our direction that night. He sent us permission to leave our foot bath, with the order to fall back.

"It was a relief for the men to march even in the rain after being so long in the mud.

So they set out in high spirits on a slippery road, in complete darkness, across the woods.

"At five in the morning the men hoped that they would be allowed to come to a halt, long enough this time really to get some sleep. But when they found that the colonel had sent for a supply of water and that they were instructed to fill their bottles, they understood that to-day would be merely a continuation of yesterday. They lay down, however, for a moment, by the side of the road. They were so muddy I could hardly distinguish them from the earth. And how grey their faces were!

"At seven in the morning we had taken up our position at the entrance of a wood. We occupied the trenches which the Germans had dug with care a few days before. The rain had ceased for the time being. It had been followed by a sharp wind. This dried our cloaks, but left us shivering.

"Toward eight o'clock some of the enemy's scouts were signalled. They were throwing up defences to our right. Our captain considered that we ought to investigate. He had noticed the expression on my face, two days before, when he had sent us as aids to the heavy artillery with which our battalion was in contact.

"He called me and gave me the following orders: 'Take your section and make a reconnaissance over there. These Boches decidedly have too much cheek!'

"I had already accomplished missions of a similar character; never in such close contact with so many of the enemy's numbers, so I was delighted. I no longer thought of the rain, of the unpropitious date, nor of the failure of our comrades. To act was to feel confident at once. My men were as glad as I.

"What followed during the day, as the battle developed, proved to what an extent this audacity of the enemy was premeditated. You know how cautiously they generally hide the preparation going on in a trench where they intend to establish a battery. We always protect ourselves from any possible indiscretion; we avoid outside contact of any sort. We strain our necks keeping a lookout in the air to see if any aeroplanes are observing us. Obviously, a battery whose position is known can't hold out very long; at the best the adversary's artillery manages to nullify any work it may attempt. Knowing the precautions we take under similar circumstances, the carelessness of the Germans toward us seemed to me disconcerting. They no more ignored our presence in their immediate neighborhood than we did theirs. And yet the soldiers, whom I could see distinctly (I had crept on somewhat ahead of my men into a clover-field), were digging, piling up tree branches, without attempting in any way to conceal what they were doing. Worse than that, a dozen or more of them had taken off their dolmans. They were working in shirt sleeves. Had they been endeavoring to show themselves they would have acted no differently.

"Such peculiar proceedings on their part aroused my curiosity. I wanted to get a nearer view of their trenches. I wanted to see whether the enemy really were working earnestly without sufficient cover, or if they were simply preparing a dummy battery in order to misguide our artillery at the moment of the clash.

"This was exactly what I was not allowed to pass judgment upon. A sentinel, who no doubt had had his eye upon me for some minutes, decided that I was advancing too far. He gave the alarm. I had only time to call to my men: 'Lie down and don't move!'

"Already a cloud of bullets stormed through the tree branches, above and about us.

"I was just going to order my men to fall back to a slope where we would be in a better position to respond to the enemy, — far superior in numbers to ourselves, — when, coming from the opposite direction, we heard another volley of hail. It was one of our own mitrailleuses starting into action.

"With this timely warning made by the sound of the bullets, the captain decided the moment had come for us to push on our action. He called us together.

"I had had time to make a rapid sketch of the trench. I ordered my men to crawl back under cover of the wood, and so we rallied in our own tracks.

"From as far as he could see us the captain called to me: 'Are your men all with you?'

"'No breakage,' I answered.

"Then, half smiling, half angry, he declared: 'I told you to go and find out what they are up to. I did not tell you to enter their trenches!'

"I relished this reproach particularly and my men did the same. I left them to go and report to the colonel.

"I longed to tell him that the preparations which I had seen under way appeared to be sham. But that would have been putting an interpretation on facts, which was none of my business, and, after all, it was only an impression I had.

"The chief listened to me, biting his cigar end, and then he went to join the colonel of the regiment which was to make the attack with ours. That colonel is here in this hospital now; you need only cross the garden to see him. He has a fine face, — so soldierly. He is installed in a little cottage which you can see from my window. He fell twenty-four hours after I did. The bullet struck him full in the chest; it entered just above his Legion of Honor Cross. He can give you, more clearly than I, an account of what we had hoped to accomplish on those two days, the 22d and 23d of September, and of what we actually did.

"I expected to find my men asleep. They had got up forty-eight hours before, on Sunday, at four o'clock. It was noon on Tuesday now. This made fifty-six hours during which these fellows had been marching back and forth, doing odd jobs, making reconnaissances, even fighting under a pelting rain, without fire or sleep.

"Now they might have taken some rest had they wanted to, for they knew the attack would not begin before noon. Yet I found them wide awake.

"One of them said to me jokingly: 'Dead or alive, we'll have plenty of time to sleep after the battle.'

"A trifle after noon I was given a bit of news which rejoiced me. My superior officers had decided to give me a mark of their precious confidence.

"On the hill beyond there was a village which our colonel believed to have been deserted. He thought that the only piece of heavy artillery which since morning had been responding to our '75' had been left in the village by the enemy to mislead us.

"His plan was simple. The 19th Company was to spread out over the ground in the form of a lozenge. The sections were to be stationed a hundred mètres apart in all directions. We would take the village from the right. With this aim in view, I passed ahead with my section, composed of fifty men.

"I have been told since that our colonel ought not to have been content with merely studying the landscape through a field-glass, that he ought to have dispatched a scout to determine whether the village really was empty, as he presumed it to be. This precautionary measure would have prevented the massacre of our battalion and heavy losses for our regiment.

"I can't go into this discussion. A chief receives orders which he transmits to his subalterns. I want to say one thing, however: in my bed, as I lie here, I am full of gratitude to my colonel for the opportunity he gave me. Thanks to him, if things had turned out well, I could have distinguished myself.

"It was about two o'clock when we came out of our trenches to pass along the edge of the wood. At first we marched in single file for about fifty minutes. My watch marked three o'clock when we reached the height where my section, according to the plan, was to come out leading at the left. Already we had been discovered by the enemy.

"We had long since grown accustomed to the crashing of the shells, but it was the first time we had been enveloped in a very network of bullets fired at such close range. This was the death-line surely.

"I had long looked forward to this moment. Since the beginning of the campaign and before that; when I used to go to the manœuvres, and even farther back, at school, when I used to study the new map of our eastern frontiers, I used to say to myself then: 'So long as you have not been put to that test you won't know your real worth.'

"You know as well as I do that the instinctive movement at such a time does n't carry you forward. I thought of you, of mamma, of Guy, of Marie-Rose, and of Helen. I said to you in my heart: 'It is for you!' — and then, my eyes closed, I plunged forward!

"The wood was behind us now. We were crawling in the open.

"You know the manœuvre: the moment there is a lull, you bound forward on all fours. I was in the midst of my men. We advanced as though we were swimming.

"The horizon was hidden by a hilltop which at about three hundred mètres from us rose up against the sky. The Germans, who were entrenched behind the slope, had plenty of time to take good aim at us as though we were so many hares started up.

"Instantly there were wounded — dead, probably — among our number, for all the bullets did not merely dig up earth before our noses and fall gently against our water-cups.

"I did not stop to count those who fell. I cried out: 'Closer! Closer!' — and I threw myself ahead of the men to encourage them. Thus, bounding on, in a series of leaps, we covered about two hundred mètres and started to crawl up the slope. At each move my section was thinning out, but the men followed me.

"One grows accustomed to everything. When we had faced the first volley, at the foot of the hill, I had thought: 'We shall not make ten mètres!'

"Now it seemed as though the bullets were not intended for me. I could see myself at the top of the hill already. I would throw my section on those who were hiding beyond. Like Pierrette and the jug of milk! Yet one can't regret having had such hopes for a moment. They seem to be made up of a childish faith, of love, of all that is supernatural and quite complete.

"They did not last long. I opened my mouth to call out again: 'Onward, my boys!' — when a column of earth and dust passed over us and glued us to the ground. The Boches had brought up their mitrailleuses. In addition the rain was rattling down as it does in Paris when a storm-cloud bursts and people are obliged to seek shelter, from the hail, under the porte-cochères.

"I threw off the earth that had fallen on me. I seized by his shoulders a soldier lying at my right. I did the same for a man at my left, and the others — they did not move. They stared at me with their poor eyes. I could not tell whether they had been killed or had died of fright.

"For a moment I was in despair. This was not what they had pledged me. I stood up in the hailing bullets and shouted with all my strength: 'If I am killed, it is your fault! . . . But as long as you lie there without moving I shall remain standing!'

"They heard me. Four or five of them lifted themselves up on their elbows; the others followed.

"They roused themselves; again we moved forward.

"I wanted to see what was beyond the hilltop, so I crawled up to the crest.

"It was at that moment that I was shot through the arm by the bullet I wrote you of in my letter . . . here. . . . At first I thought a stone had struck me. The blood pouring down my sleeve enlightened me. I tried moving my fingers. Nothing serious had been touched, so I took no further notice of the wound. Far more disturbing was what I had just seen beyond the crest of the hill.

"It was only a thin point, and on the other side of it, under the slope, was a sort of hollow which would have to be got over running, under the enemy's fire, before we could reach the foot of the second hill, which could not be seen from our plain. Beyond the second defence the Germans were entrenched solidly, and always hidden from us.

"I was sure that my men would rise to

the occasion and would leap over the first hill. But in order that such sacrifices be of use, the whole battalion should have been stationed already on the slope, ready to follow us, and push forward with us.

"No such order came to me. Nor did I receive notice to fall back. I received nothing. It was cruel to leave my men to be killed, one after the other, lying there on the ground. They deserved that more use be made of their lives or of their death.

"I came back to my section. I looked behind us.

"To the left things were going badly. There was a company there going to pieces. When they had disappeared, all would be up with us. On the other side, our artillery was hammering away on the trenches which I had reconnoitred in the morning, and which were only a sham. We had no idea where the batteries were situated which were pelting us now.

"At this very moment I saw my dear friend, Lieutenant Jean-José, leading half a section. He was bounding up the hill toward us. The storm of the mitrailleuse had slackened a bit, but the shells and the shrapnel had started up.

"I shouted out to him: 'Steady there! . . . I'll come down!'

"We each went halfway and I asked him:

"'Are you bringing me orders?'

"'None whatever!'

"'I shall go for them, then.'

"On the way down I met our captain and said to him: 'The 20th over there has collapsed. Shall we go to their assistance?'

"He was kneeling on the ground. He looked and then shook his head: 'Let them shift for themselves. The major wants the whole forward movement continued.'

"I went on down to where the major was standing and told him what I had been able to see from above. He replied: 'You have succeeded in reaching there? . . . Remain there! I shall try to climb up beside you. I want to have a look over the crest of the hill.'

"So I returned to my post and said to my men: 'We are to wait.'

"The storm that had been falling had not been the best thing in the world for all, and there were not many of us left to wait. Yet the major had set out at once; he was almost up to us. Stopping a moment for breath, he crawled to the crest of the hill. I saw his cap: it stood out against the sky. Suddenly he raised his left arm. He made a gesture with his right arm and shouted something. 'What?' I answered.

He did not have time to repeat his command. He fell on his back. . . . He lay there, groaning: 'My wife! . . . My children!'

"Perhaps what he wanted to call out was, 'Advance.' I beckoned to one of the men,— a young priest, — who is a fine fellow, full of feeling. I said to him: 'Sergeant Bresson, go to the major there. Take him some water. Ask him if he has any orders for me, and carry him down from where he lies.'

"I followed the sergeant with my eyes. At the moment when he stooped to kneel by the major, I saw his arm drop. A bullet had demolished it. This did not prevent Bresson's praying aloud.

"I thought to myself: 'The sergeant won't come back and the major is dying. I must go to them and lose no time about it, otherwise I shall not know whether he wants me to go across the hill.'

"So I got up, and in order to hasten matters, instead of creeping over the ground, I ran toward my chief. I did not go far. The good German marksman who had taken aim at the major and then at Bresson, or some other marksman equally skillful, fired at me, twice in succession. His first shot went through the sack hanging on my back. Then he changed his aim about the width of two fingers. That bullet went in under my right arm, traversed both lungs, and made the wound you know.

"It seems that I said: 'I have been hit!'

"Immediately some of my men came to my assistance. I gave them the order: 'Let Lieutenant Jean-José know.'

"They told me that this noble friend was coming up to me. It was n't worth while. I gave orders that they shout to him: 'Don't come on!'

"The lieutenant was needed at the head of his section, and I counted on him to let Helen know. Moreover, there was nothing just then to be done for me.

"I commanded my men: 'Go back to your posts . . .'

"And I settled myself to wait."

XXV

It is nearly an hour that my poor boy has been talking and that I have been hanging on his words without having the courage to stop him. I realize that he is using strength he will never regain, but he longs so to speak, and one cannot impose silence upon the dying.

Yet, for a moment, he ceases, closing his eyes. When he opens them again he sees that I am standing at the foot of his bed.

He says, with a consideration which overwhelms me:

"You must be tired holding up my pillow . . . I shall lie down for a moment, and then I want to go on. . . ."

After a few moments he begins again:

"At the second the bullet struck me, and as I was falling, I realized that I was going to be paralyzed. I turned myself over while I still had the strength. My thoughts worked like lightning. I said to myself: 'If they come later to pick us up, I don't want them to think me dead.' And also I wanted to see what was happening to the end.

"When my men had dragged me down a little under the hill, I lost consciousness a moment. I did n't notice that they had slipped a sack under my head. It was there when I came to my senses.

"The bullets continued to rain over my head. All our men had climbed down to the foot of the slope. I was alone.

"I could move my arms. I turned my wrist so that I could see my watch. It was a little after four o'clock. Above me the sky was grey and it was still raining a little.

"I longed to move my legs, and yet I did not dare try, for fear of discovering that I no longer had control over them. At last I summoned all my courage. I tried several times. They hung there like two sacks. Then I realized what had happened to me."

He stops a moment. He does not want to say the forbidden word. And the memory of his sacrifice prolongs itself in a silence where my soul meets his.

I know, my boy, that the time is coming when you will no longer be able to speak to me. Then some voice, near by, will say: "He no longer suffers now!" — and we shall fold your hands.

Then you will have ceased living for us. But I know that you died for yourself at that moment when, stretched out on that hillside, alone, before God, your country, your love, you accepted without a murmur.

XXVI

"Now, my child, I want you to rest!"

"No, no! . . . There is more I want to tell you . . ."

He does not add: "To-morrow, shall I be able to go on?"

He guesses what is in my heart, and he does not want me to despair.

"I assure you," he says, "that physically I did not suffer as much as one would suppose. I mean from my wound, for, almost at once, I was tormented by thirst. It was almost a blessing; it kept me from thinking too much.

"I did not say to myself: 'I want to get up. . . . I want to recover!'

"The idea of drinking absorbed me. I opened my mouth in the hope that a few drops of rain might fall into it, but I did not feel them.

"The bullets continued to fall like hail.

They did not bother me, only the time seemed long, terribly long.

"I don't know how long it lasted that way. But in my misery something very beautiful happened. Suddenly I heard a voice beside me. I asked: 'Who is there?' For I was above all afraid of the Germans appearing. I did not want to fall into their hands alive.

"An answer came: 'It is I, Péguy!'

"Péguy was one of my men, a poor fellow whom I had often been obliged to reprimand, for he had a way of looking as though he had just dropped out of the moon, which set the others to laughing. I knew that he had a wife and a child.

"He had left the cover of the woods now to come to my assistance. He had reached me crawling. It was terribly dangerous. Surely, if I had thought some one might come to help me, it was not Péguy.

"When he was quite close to me, he said: 'Lieutenant! I have n't always been a good soldier. I have given you a lot of trouble, but to-day you have honored us all, and I could n't bear to leave you lying here, so I have come to fetch you.'

"You can't imagine how glad I was to feel that I was n't abandoned. I answered him: 'My dear Péguy, I thank you with all my heart, but I am not able to move. You would get killed here for nothing. Only unfasten my collar because I am suffocating, and, if you can, give me something to drink.'

"He did as I asked. He gave me some water with a little mint. Then I said to him: 'Péguy, I command you to go back.'

"He obeyed, going down on all fours.

"After he had left me, — it must have been about five o'clock, I think, — I remained alone until midnight.

"It was not my wound that caused me the greatest suffering. It was all that was going on above my head and around me. Their mitraille wearied me. It no longer fell at my side: it passed high up in the air. No doubt they were bombarding the wood which we had left behind us early in the day.

"Beneath me it seemed that the earth had become a raft. I seemed to be climbing up high waves only to fall back again in the sea's trough. This was only imagination, of course; the bombarding was violent, but the slope on which I lay was not shaken by it. . . . The rocking was in myself. . . . It is there still. . . . Even in my bed I don't feel as though I were lying flat. I rise and sink on the waves. It is very fatiguing."

As he said this he stopped a moment, and on his face, as upon that of a drowning man, I see the marks of distress. Poor, human derelict, his feet in the air, his head downward, he drifts toward some unknown shore!

Yet he wants to end his story, so that he shall not have to resume it, as this effort, after so many others, is cruel for him. He begins again:

"I was glad when I saw the night coming, as I said to myself: 'When those who are firing at us can no longer see, perhaps my men will come to find me.' I was thinking of my men because I had been attached to them and I was sure of their devotion.

"My hopes were fulfilled.

"Toward six in the evening I heard sounds approaching. Some one called me in the darkness. I answered. A moment after they were beside me, four or five of those fine fellows whom I had sometimes assisted on long marches by carrying their sacks for them; and also by caring for their poor feet, as you had advised me to do. Because of such little acts of kindness, they had come now to find me on the battlefield.

"They had no litter, so they tried to carry me without. It could n't be done. Then they made a sort of couch by crossing their rifles and throwing a cloak over them. I was longing enough to get away, but the barrels of the guns proved too hard for such a wound as mine. I felt myself growing cold.

"'I'm done for,' I said to them. . . . 'Put me down on the ground. . . . I would rather it ended there!'

"They were exhausted themselves, but they were determined not to abandon me. So they laid me down in the grass. Two of them remained with me; the others went off in search of something better for me.

"I don't know how long my friends and I stayed there tête-à-tête. I had only one idea in my head — like an obsession — to get back. . . . Where? . . . To Paris probably.

"It was about midnight when I found myself on some straw, on the ground floor of a farmhouse. There were many of our wounded about me; some were dying, others already dead.

"Since then I have heard that as my litter was carried down from the field, my colonel, who was wounded also, dragged himself over to greet me as I passed. I have a sort of vague memory of hearing him speak my name and say: 'Farewell, lieutenant! . . . Farewell, my poor child!'

"I was not able to answer him. He understands, for they say I was looking very far gone.

"I don't know whether I was examined after that. If they had time to find out what was the matter with me, they must have decided it was fairer to care first for those who could be saved. How many of us there were! Our major had been killed, our captain, a second lieutenant, not to speak of the soldiers who were in their last agony.

"Everything that took place that night is vague in my memory. It seems that a priest came to visit us. I gave him, they say, my wallet, with my papers, your letters, Helen's, and your addresses. I have no recollection of all this. I acted as though in a dream of which nothing remains on waking. One thing I do remember, the moment when my dear friend, Lieutenant Jean-José, appeared by my side.

"He had seen me fall and had been looking for me. He had continued to search in spite of the bullet which had struck him in the knee. It was a comfort to see him again.

"Since the outset of the campaign we had lived side by side, like brothers. We had promised each other that, if a misfortune befell either of us, the one surviving would write a letter, I to his wife, he to my fiancée.

"He had come now to know whether he were to fulfil his promise. I said to him: 'I am seriously wounded. Both my lungs and the spine. . . . But perhaps I can recover, at my age!'

"He understood. He knew that I wanted him to say in the letter he was to write Helen: 'There is hope.' He did as I asked, and I shall *never* forget it."

Do you hear, Jean-José, my friend, the faithful friend who tended my boy? He said "Never," at a moment when such a word savors of the eternal.

XXVII

Once more I try to interrupt him, for his pale face, tanned by the sun, is touched with a flush of pink in the cheeks.

He insists: "It does n't matter. . . . I have something more, very fine, to tell you. Often I wrote you that I was proud of my men. . . . You can't imagine how kind-hearted they are. . . ."

I can see him smiling as though to some pleasing vision. . . . Of whom I can guess! For an instant thus, between his resignation and his sufferings, passes the image of his pure, young love.

"That night in the farmhouse was hard! The bombarding continued uninterruptedly, and they were taking good aim now. We could hear roofs falling in, walls crumbling, trees being uprooted. Those of us who were seriously wounded lived in terror. It was worse than our physical sufferings. We were haunted by this thought: 'If things keep on like this, they will have to evacuate the village. . . . What then? . . . Those of us who cannot use our legs to walk will be left behind.'

"We all feel alike. Anything is better than to fall into the Germans' hands, to have to see them before dying.

"Toward six in the morning they told us that some carts were on the way to fetch us. Those who could help themselves climbed into these wagons. I was n't among them. I waited until three in the afternoon without any one even having time to give me a drink.

"Then some more carts were sent for us. A field surgeon came into the room where I was lying. He took us all in at a glance. He was weighing our relative chances, for there were only a few places to be disposed of, and we were numerous.

"They were going to leave me a second time, when one of my men, who had been chosen to leave, pointed me out. He called out to the orderlies who were bringing in a litter: 'Take him! . . . Take him! . . . He is engaged to be married!'

"I have spoken to you already of Péguy, who brought me a drink in the firing-line, and I know you won't forget him. But of this one I cannot tell you the name . . . I was too far gone. I could just hear what he said. It seemed like dew falling on my heart, and, for a moment, I felt I had been saved. I did not even have the strength to say 'Thank you!' to this comrade, who, at such a moment, had given me his turn. Because he knew that I was in love, and loved. Because he thought I could be carried somewhere to a bed where I could lie until perhaps some friendly hand might come to touch me."

The shadows are gathering in the room now. Twice the head nurse has opened the door gently to look at him. Now she comes in. She nods toward our patient with a shade of reproach.

"He is tiring himself out! We must leave him alone now."

I go back to the threshold of his room to look at him once more. He has closed his eyes, but he is not asleep, for his lips are moving.

He is praying, praying for him whose name he does n't know, and who, in the midst of so much agony, offered himself in order to make a place for the Love which triumphs over Death.

XXVIII

I GO back to think by myself in the shelter which has been offered me near the hospital gate by the head surgeon.

I am lodged in a place directly opposite the iron paling. It used to be a wineshop. Before the war the people who came up to visit the sick used to stop there and take a drink to revive their spirits.

The room where I sleep opens into the kitchen. As this part of the house is not built over a cellar, the walls are dank. It is used like a storeroom, for fruit, cheese, pumpkins, and milk cans. At any other time all these odors would keep me from sleeping, but I am in a state of body and mind in which nothing affects me.

Behind my door I can hear our cook coming and going — Big Louis, and his assistant Goddin. Both of them are orderlies. They take turns doing night duty in the wards.

On the night of my arrival they adopted me. They treat me with an almost tender consideration which sometimes brings to my eyes the tears I can't shed before my son.

The head surgeon said to me: "With a fellow like Big Louis you could go to the end of the world!"

One can go to the end of suffering with him too. He is a butcher by profession, but he was born with the instinct of fraternity; he seems to comfort all those who go near him.

The hospital regulations don't allow me to remain in my boy's ward at night, on the empty bed, opposite his.

Big Louis realizes what this sacrifice costs me. He said to me at once: "Goddin and I take turns on night duty in the pavilion where your son is. If he should take a turn for the worse we would run to tell you."

This good fellow realizes probably that in my anguish, between the fruit and the cheese, I pass my nights open-eyed. He has noticed that I generally fall asleep toward morning when the chill of the autumn dawn sends the dampness drifting down the walls of my cellar-like room. He prepares the breakfast as noiselessly as possible, so as not to disturb my sleep. And scarcely am I awake when he pushes open my door, thrusts in his curly head, and announces: "The lieutenant has had a good night!"

In these hours of world-destruction, here in this distant barracks of suffering, where death is mowing down such hosts of young, on the brink of your tomb, my boy, it is a comfort to my sad heart, this kindliness of a poor laborer. It is the same as that shown you by the soldier who brought you a drink, by the other one who gave you his chance. Big Louis now, regardless of fatigue, spends half of each night watching, so that my anguish, which has roused his pity, may have moments of forgetfulness.

XXIX

"And now there is n't much more to tell you!"

If I did not know what I do know, I could almost believe that my son is better.

Big Louis declares to me: "It's his joy at seeing you." The head surgeon says nothing.

And as my son talks to me, his mind so clear, his spirit seeming to hover on his lips, I am thinking of the flame that leaps up before it dies.

He resumes his story:

"In the cart which brought me back, as it bumped along the stony road, I would rather not say what my suffering was . . . I try to forget it. I had not been bandaged. I hung on to the side of the wagon.

"When we reached the end of our journey I had become a being who was all eyes! I could see Helen looking at me. . . . This kept me alive. . . .

"It was night by the time they had set us down before a little château, which I had admired a week before as we halted there for a moment. Now the château and the outbuildings were all crowded to overflowing with the wounded.

"They put me down in a hallway and I could hear the men who had been carrying me say in a low voice: 'This one is done for!'

"Each time a surgeon passed, I spoke my name — your name — as distinctly as I could, so that they would come to my aid.

"At last one of the surgeons stopped by my side. He leaned over me. He asked me if I were your son, the nephew of the surgeon of the Montpellier Faculty.

"I told him I was. 'Your uncle was my instructor,' he said. . . . 'Wait a moment. . . . I shall be able to examine you presently.' He promised to tell me the truth about myself.

"In a few minutes he returned and examined me on my litter, where he made the first dressing I had had. I could not see his face, but I heard the diagnosis as he dictated it. When he said, 'I'm going to have you put near me on a mattress in the drawing-room,' he looked at me in such a kindly way that I understood. It was then that I asked to write to you. How could he find time to help me! He is a man of deep feeling. The horrors he has seen have not dulled his sensibilities.

"There were three of us on the same mattress. Everything was wet with blood, but I was better there than on the floor. I had entirely regained my senses. I was very grateful.

"The night, however, was terrible. They had set up an operating-table in the middle of the room, under the chandelier. The wounded were passed along, one after another. I remember particularly clearly a captain whom they were trepanning. He was living his battle over and over. He kept shouting: 'Forward! . . . We've got them, boys! . . . Forward! . . .'

"It was hard, too, to hear men with grey hair calling out: 'Mamma!'

"Many of those who were under the chloroform cried out as though they were awake. Perhaps I did the same! I imagined myself, as they did, still leading on my men, yelling, howling! . . . I have the same impression now. . . . I can't seem to realize that I am alone.

"And yet, toward morning, I fell asleep, not into unconsciousness, but into a natural sleep. It was the first time since I was wounded. When I woke up it was broad daylight. I had an amusing surprise.

"By my side, sitting on the edge of my mattress, was a splendid fellow, whom you don't know, but with whom I became acquainted in a charming way last winter; he is the sergeant of dragoons, Dombrowsky.[1] He and his sister are friends of Helen.

"We used to meet at balls. He is a cultivated fellow, slightly 'précieux,' perhaps. He was among the first to write when he heard I was engaged. He congratulated me on my happiness. He was to have been one of our ushers.

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[1] Killed in action, May 20, 1915.

"I could not believe my eyes. I said to him: 'Dombrowsky! . . . You here? . . . Where have you dropped from?'

"What he told me touched me infinitely. The day before he had been told by the commissary that I had fallen, and all about it. He went immediately to find his colonel. He told him of our friendship. He asked permission — which was granted him — to come and pay me a visit.

"This charming friend was so delighted to find me in that heap of humanity that I felt as though I were being fairly raised from my mattress. I liked to pretend to myself that it was Helen who had sent him to me.

"So we began to talk, and we talked on and on, as if we were not in a field hospital, beside an operating-table, but at the famous Baraduc's, taking a lesson in the 'Turkey Trot' or 'Hesitation Waltz'! He would say, 'Do you remember . . .?' and I would answer, 'Yes . . .! And do you remember . . .?'

"We were so happy!

"Suddenly he asked me: 'What can I do for you?'

"I was always tortured with thirst. I said: 'Find me some champagne.'

"You can imagine how jokingly I said this word 'champagne.' I might as well have said 'caviar' or the 'moon.' But he sprang up declaring: 'I'll get you some.'

"I wanted to detain him, to explain that I was only joking; that I would much rather have him spend with me whatever time he had. But already he had gone.

"He did n't return until four hours later. He brought with him a bottle of real champagne. What he told me seemed as miraculous as all the rest.

"Two days previous he had taken a squad of Uhlans by surprise in a neighboring village, and put them to rout. Thereupon an old peasant, whom the Germans had taken time to ill-use, threw himself on Dombrowsky's breast. He said: 'If ever the longing takes you to drink a bottle of champagne, remember me. I promise to find you one.'

"So, when I asked for champagne, he recalled this promise, sprang on to his horse, and went to find the grateful peasant. He claimed the fulfilment of his pledge, which it seems delighted the old man, who, with great alacrity, dug up a bottle which he had buried at the foot of a walnut tree, and Dombrowsky brought it back to me.

"We drank it as though it were the elixir of life. I say 'we,' for you won't be surprised when I tell you that my two companions on the mattress were invited to touch glasses with us.

"This was the end of my adventures. A few hours later I was lifted carefully into a motor ambulance and transferred here. The director was kind enough to act as secretary. I dictated a letter to him for Helen, another one for you. And you came to me.

"When I try to sum up in my memory my short campaign, I feel rather sore. I had promised you all, you, Helen, Marie-Rose, to do my best. How glad I would have been of a better chance to keep my word. All those weeks of preparation, long marches, counter-marches, the days in the trenches, the reconnaissances, the rain, the bombarding; all that counts for nothing. My effort really began at the foot of the hill where I received the order to go ahead, leading my section in a bayonet attack at the crest of the hill. It was then half-past three. At four o'clock, I was stretched on the ground. My war lasted one half-hour and three hundred mètres."

This is my son's story, as he told it to me on that October evening, on the hospital bed, which he will leave only to be laid under the earth.

Under pretext of sending these details to his fiancée and his sister, I wrote almost to his dictation.

If, in the years to come, when our present misery has become a legend of glory, some youth of our family — I can no longer say, of my name — should chance to read this story, may he find in it the love of honor, the love of France.

In memory of the dear son who dictated these lines, and of myself, his father, who noted them, at the foot of his death-bed.

XXX

It is a quarter of a century now since I crossed the Sahara Desert, from southern Morocco to southern Tunis, with a military expedition, during the dog days, on a dromedary. On this exploring trip I first learned what it means to be thirsty—a thirst that goes beyond the lips, seems to dry up the tongue, the throat, going down into the very chest, until one becomes almost delirious. But at the moment of our worst torture, we were sure of one thing: every advance step of the beasts we were mounted on shortened our misery. The vast dune was vanishing behind us: the oasis was drawing nearer.

Within these four hospital walls I am shut up with a traveller whose thirst will never more be quenched.

The pity felt for him on all sides places in my hands fresh milk, champagne, the purest of water. His eyes follow me with heartrending fixity as I try, in the hope of making the time seem shorter, to vary the different beverages, so eagerly waited for. He says: "Now I want some champagne and water. . . . Now give me a little milk and Vichy. . . . A little water alone. . . . Is the ice all melted?"

Alas! He has drunk of death. The bitter taste burns his throat.

While he was telling me his calvary I saw his lips grow dry and more dry. The moments grew oftener when he stopped, almost as frequent as his heart-beats, to beg for a taste of something refreshing.

How he must have suffered before I was with him, when he called the orderlies, who could only turn a deaf ear, as they hastened to some other sufferer!

Don't beg my pardon, my child, for making me get up so often. It is a joy for me to wait on you as long as you shall ask it. Command me! Be capricious if you will! Ask for what you want!

When, after a long pause, in which you have summoned all your patience in order to spare me, I hand you a glass, all moist from the ice within, you say to me: "I am dreaming that some day I shall be in a place where I can have as much water as I want, as much as ever I want."

I turn aside to hide my face, for in your eyes I have seen the vision of Paradise.

XXXI

I CAN no longer postpone paying my respects to the military authorities. I want also to ask their permission to prolong my stay.

My friend, the priest chauffeur, drives me down to the city.

The place is empty of all its inhabitants. Exiled, they have left their doors closed, their shutters drawn. The shopkeepers have riveted the heavy blinds on their show windows. And the old residential quarters show long rows of flat silent walls, overgrown, here and there, by some vine, some green plant of a deserted garden.

The young women, the little children, whose presence, as they walked about, enlivened the public squares, the principal streets of the town, have been replaced by a world of soldiers. All uniforms, all grades, are to be seen here.

No one is idle. Each one, the bearer of

some order, hurries toward some definite duty. People walk in the street as freely as on the sidewalk. From time to time the harsh cry of a motor parts the crowd of pedestrians: some superior officer, wrapped in his great-coat, flashes by. Or some heavy truck, that seems too long, too broad, for the winding way of these streets, built in the Middle Ages, passes, shaking the old houses to their foundations. Or some squad of cavalrymen files by, their swords swinging with a slight clinking of chains, the sonorous trampling of their horses' hoofs on the ancient paving-stones.

My little priest knows the town like his own checked pocket handkerchief. He takes me first to the house of the General of the État-Major, and then to that of the Governor-General of the place.

I bring them a breath of Paris, to these exiled officers, words that cannot now appear in print, but which, some day, will go to make up history, for they bear witness to this fact: France, though tortured, continues to smile.

And, too, I don't conceal from them my own grief. In my present state of mind it is a comfort to me that the blotting-out of a little lieutenant, who has done his duty faithfully, stands out against the gigantic slaughter going on, shines in the splendor of a sacrifice which has become universal.

The Governor-General of the place says to me: "I went to pay a visit to your son. You have brought the boy up well. I congratulate you."

At the État-Major, a certain Major Étienne — I shall never forget him — says to me as I take leave of him: "A young and glorious comrade who dies without a murmur, a father who refuses to weep for him! What an example! — We all need examples. Come often to see us."

I came up the steps of the building with a heavy heart. I leave feeling somewhat stronger. They have given me permission to stay on as long as I like. My child will not see me leave him. I shall be able to remain by his side until his eyes grow dim. Death alone now can drive me away.

XXXII

To-day, at two o'clock, when I went into his ward, I received a shock. It is a new Robert I see on the bed.

The wounded man of yesterday, for whom every word was a cause of suffering, has disappeared. In his place I see a radiant person. The accident, whatever it be, which keeps him stretched out at full length, does n't affect his mind or his freedom of speech. He is bubbling over with confidences. His lips move on, almost volubly.

He says: "I have been thinking things over in the night and I have decided we must not miss the chance of renting the apartment I went to visit with Helen, the end of July. . . . We liked it so much! . . . You know, Quai Malaquais. . . . Overlooking the Seine. The house is rather old and we supposed it would be insufficiently heated. But Helen will have the light she needs for her painting and I shall be just around the corner from my office. If you go back to Paris before I do, please go to see if the sign *To Let* is still hanging over the door."

I look at my child with stupefaction. He takes no heed of me, however, for just now he is talking from the bottom of his happy heart. A mysterious hand has turned the obscure dial which was hiding from him his "to-morrow." He is living over again the dreams he dreamed before the war. He is deep in his plans. He carries me away with him.

With a smile he dispels my anxiety.

"You don't feel feverish?" I ask him.

And he answers: "Not at all! I want to tell you something which may at first sight seem rather mad to you. You remember the Arabian servant we used to have, Amara?"

The name recalls a native horseman, whom, twenty years before, I had brought back with me to Paris, from his Algerian mountain-top, to care for my horse. His chechia, his little blue jacket, his full red trousers, his spurs, created a sensation among the maidservants from the Avenue de Villiers to the Place Malesherbes.

He could do anything and everything, like all those of his race who have been trained at the *bordjs* by the functionaries' wives.

"You have n't forgotten him?" he asks. "Well, I don't know how, but away off in his province of Oran, Amara heard that I was to be married. He wrote to me. He asked me to take him into my service. He said I must remember what a good cook he is, and that he knows also how to wash and iron and all the rest. Have n't you often told me yourself that he was the first nurse Marie-Rose had? He would make a wonderful man-of-all work for us! Helen is like me in this respect: she enjoys picturesque things."

I have just time to answer: "Of course, my dear child."

Already his fancy is chasing another butterfly in the sunlight.

This goes on for two long hours — all too short for him. Then, by degrees, his thoughts grow more sombre, become more melancholy, until at last he says to me: "All that is only a dream! I have been dreaming."

. . . On the threshold of the big ward, I run across the chief surgeon. He sees how disturbed I am. He says to relieve me: "The lieutenant was in great pain during the night, so we increased his usual dose of morphine. You were with him in a moment of elation!"

XXXIII

I OUGHT to be glad that he can know in this way moments of forgetfulness before the hour comes when he shall have forgotten all. Then why do I feel a sob in my throat?

I must walk off this agitation, quiet the beating of my poor heart.

I pass out of the hospital gate. I wander on aimlessly. My steps seem to be guided for me.

In August, my child had spoken to me in one of his letters about a thirteenth-century church, which is one of the treasures of this ancient city. It is reached through a cloister which opens on to a little square.

One day, when he chanced to be in the town, doing errands for the regiment, he went for a moment, as though to shelter there his faith and his love, in this church.

I am glad to be there alone now.

The church is as empty as the city. The last rays of the sun illuminate the stained-glass windows, the splendors of Paradise, as the glory of the Middle Ages conceived them. A few candles shine out like pale stars, lighted in haste by some passing soldiers who have stopped here a moment on the way to combat.

Here is the baptismal font, where, for centuries, joyous processions have carried the newborn. Here is the altar, where, for generations, the young couples who have chosen each other tenderly have knelt to bind their love and their dreams in the vows of eternity. Here are the stones, worn down by the weight of those who are wrapped in their shrouds.

I shall kneel here, O God! as I turn to Thee in supplication.

For twenty years I went my way, a son on either side of me. They were my honor. I did not consider that they belonged to me more than they did to God. I did not forget that God gives life, and that it is His to take again.

When He took my first son I bowed my head. I do not question now His taking my only remaining boy. But, when I put this last child in the tomb, will my faith be buried with him? I ask myself this question in all humility.

Science itself, which certain men of my generation have made their dogma, remains a mystery for me, as deep a mystery as the mysteries of God. I have read their books. I admire their effort to search out the truth. What I have been able to grasp through them does not deprive me of the hope that the beloved forms we have loved, and whose substance is of dust and returns to dust, are each and all animated by the breath of God.

It is His will that still again one of these precious apparitions must slip from my grasp. After so many sorrows I must now see my son go, my last son, the end of our lineage. At this moment, when I so long to be comforted, what do I see?

I know how brave this dying boy of mine is. Neither physical pain nor any other can wring from him the cry he does not want me to hear, and which would seem like a reproach to God.

When his sufferings overcome him, he pretends that he needs to rest, and he asks me to leave him for a time so that I shall not be saddened by the sight of his misery. Yet, to-day, I found him suddenly enveloped in joy.

He was beginning a new life, the hopes he had relinquished were all renewed again. He was going to recover. He formulated plans for future work. He felt the hand of his fiancée in his, his heart overflowing with her response to his love. He smiled at me without a cloud on his face. He said to me: "When are we to leave here?"

This hope, which blinds him, and which crucifies me, is a lie. He does not find its source in his faith in God, nor in his consideration for me. Its gentle blessing has not entered his soul through any miracle of divine grace: it has sprung from a poison contained in a bottle; it is passed into his veins through a needle-point. One dose calms the suffering caused by his wound; another dose relieves the agony of his mind; still another stronger dose restores him to happiness.

Meanwhile, where is his soul? Where is the soul of my son which I struggle to think of as having an existence apart from the body which I shall lay away in the tomb?

What becomes of this soul, intangible, immaterial, immortal, spiritual, the soul which I am determined to seek in God? Which is right, my grief appalled at the thought of annihilation, when I see my child's death agony, or the voice which affirms: "The thoughts, the breathing, the feelings, all the phenomena you are observing, are the results of a unique mechanism. The whole thing will stop at a given moment, and forever."

O God, forbid that my faith should perish! Deliver me from temptation!

XXXIV

"We are playing a delicate game," the chief surgeon says to me with his Celtic smile, — so kindly, so sad. . . . "Our chief anxiety, you see, is that the magic of the poison should outlast the resistance of our patient."

So I must resign myself to it as to everything else. From to-day on, my child, I shall follow you in these two existences without a murmur.

When I feel the veil of illusion vanishing away and the shadow descending upon your brow, I, too, have a talisman to turn to. It prolongs on your precious face the light that soon shall have faded.

I ask in a low tone: "Suppose we read over some of Helen's letters?"

The reply is always the same: "I was just going to ask you that."

When I arrived here these love-letters

were all tucked away on a shelf at the head of his bed. Sometimes he would reach up and touch them. He did not open them, however, for the writing — clear and distinct as it is — dances before his eyes so that he cannot make it out. But he knew the letters were there.

I have put them in their proper order. They were with him in the rain, under fire. He lay on them when he was for hours in such agony, alone, on the slope of the hill. He carried one of them on his heart; it is stained with blood.

They tell of the love of a young girl, these charming love-letters, so tender. They count the days. They speak of the unbearable anxiety. They follow on the map every step of the absent one. They urge him not to be too reckless; they cherish his courage. They allude to the short past, which, for two happy children, was a lifetime. They evoke a future in which all their happiness shall be illuminated by glorious memories. They hold a hope which binds together heaven and earth.

I read them and my poor sufferer drinks them in.

He never wearies of listening to me spin out this brief romance of his engagement. Some of the letters leave him dreamy; others make him smile. He has his favorites. He loves them all.

He suffers to think that a single one of these notes, traced by a beloved hand, may perhaps be waiting behind the postman's window. So, every day, our reading ends with the same request:

"To-morrow morning, while my wound is being dressed, would you go down to the post-office in the town? I would be so grateful to you! By this time Helen must have received the letter Jean-José sent her. She knows I have been wounded. Poor little Helen!"

XXXV

My daily visit to the post-office produces on me the same impression as my hasty promenades across the hospital wards. They teach me a wholesome lesson in brotherly love.

To be sure I try not to allow my misery to hide from me the sufferings of others, but the grief which seeks isolation is in danger of becoming blind; it seems to become for itself, like love, the centre of the world.

In this military post-office I come in contact with the anguish, the tenderness of others who love as I do, fathers, mothers, wives, and husbands, brothers and sisters, fiancées, sweethearts; their longing to see each other fills the sacks piled up here on the ground, heaped up in the corners, ever added to by fresh arrivals.

Day and night, around all sorts of tables, snatched haphazard from deserted wineshops, the soldiers are sorting, sealing, tying. They have been told to make haste. Their own good-will prods them on faster than any order. They don't forget it for a moment: all that they handle here is the expression of some farewell, a kiss of adieu.

Where is he to be found now — such and such a soldier, of the 19th Company of the 356th Regiment, 145th Brigade, 73d Division, 20th Army Corps? A few days ago, not a dozen kilomètres from here, his battalion was shot to pieces. Is he waiting his letters in some hospital? At the dépôt? In the trenches, or under the earth?

So it is with all the others. And yet these simple fellows never grow weary of their heavy task. They turn over the mussy envelopes, all these cards without stamps, as though they were so many bank-notes, a fortune which has been entrusted to their keeping.

The window, where I ask for mail every day, is the last one in the office. The employés have grown to know me. When they have finished counting up the words in my telegrams, which daily, in one form or another, repeat the same lamentable story, "He is holding his own . . . He is thinking of you . . . He says over your names . . ." these witnesses of my distress look at me with pity. They are happy when they have letters for us. They don't like to have to say, "Nothing as yet . . ."

These letters, when they come, hide the truth also. It has been agreed among us that Marie-Rose and the other members of the family, and our own friends, are to write as though I had come merely to help my boy through a convalescence. They all speak of the joy of seeing him again, of the welcome waiting him and the reward he so well deserves.

It is difficult to read such messages aloud at the foot of his bed without my eyes betraying my feeling, without letting my voice falter.

It is my boy's desire that those who love him shall not be saddened too soon.

XXXVI

This morning, as I was coming back from the État-Major, I ran across my friend and Robert's, standing on a street corner, Lieutenant Jean-José.

The last time I had seen him was in the foyer of a Paris theatre, on a "first night" of one of his plays. Friends were crowding around him to congratulate him on his success.

War and all he has been through have given him an added touch of youth — alert, resolute, in spite of the cane he is obliged to use, and the double rent in the knee of his trousers where the ball went in and came out.

The flash of joy which lighted up his face when he first caught sight of me vanishes at once; he realizes what my presence here signifies.

"And Robert?" he says. "Poor fellow! I went through alternate stages of hope and despair about him — when I saw him first, on the night after the battle, by the light of a little lamp lying on the straw in the corner of a farmhouse kitchen. I thought all was up with him. The priest who had been talking with him said to me: 'He is wandering in his mind. . . .' I left him overwhelmed. Then, the next morning, he was looking like himself again. He asked me to write to his fiancée. He wanted me to send her a reassuring message. I did it before having my wound dressed, and after that we did not see each other again. I was sent here to a hospital in the town. I have been on my back for a week."

In a low tone he asks: "Then, there is no hope?" And brusquely, "Come, let's have a look at him . . ."

Jean-José enters the room. He is greeted with a bound of joy. My patient's face looks like some dismal façade whose windows have all been suddenly thrown open; the light streams in, and the outward landscape is reflected in every mirror.

This handsome fellow, standing beside

his bed, his hand outstretched, has been his confidant during the hours when one mocks at the idea of death. For a moment they laugh together, as gayly as though the war had been long since ended, as though they were recalling its charming side, already growing dim in their memories; as though they were delighting together in the adventures of their valiant young days. But even such joys are short-lived, and in a moment they are recalling the details of the attack. They are still happy at being together, but now they no longer smile.

The questions follow each other rapidly:

"The captain?"

"Dead."

"Lieutenant Pascal, our little Saint-Cyr boy who dashed out under fire with his white gloves?"

"Killed."

"And the two majors . . .? And my poor men . . .?"

It is a sinister review of spectres. The regiment has dwindled to nothing under the enemy's fire.

Robert stops to think for a moment and then he says: "You and I behaved very decently."

"You more than I." And, turning to me, Jean-José says: "Has he told you what he did on the hill-top? . . . Of course not! He has given you a general idea, but I'm sure you don't know this: When he decided the time had come for him to go in search of the major for orders, he came down the slope, facing the enemy, facing the shot, standing and walking backward. When I shouted to him, 'You are mad! What do you mean?' he responded by this one sentence, characteristically French; and which ought to be mentioned in the army's despatches: 'I don't want to be shot in the back!'"

I look at my child.

He is flushing slightly: "I did n't want my men to suppose I was going off on a walk for my own pleasure."

The two clasp hands a moment, these two friends who are not to see each other again.

XXXVII

As on the day of my arrival, here I am again, seated in the office of the director. He has removed his little police cap which becomes him so well. His brown eyes, golden like his beard, study me with a charitable compassion.

"I heard you say," he begins, "that you wanted to take your son away . . . afterward. Perhaps you can obtain permission before the war is over. In any case you are acquainted with the regulations for such undertaking. . . . Wood . . . lead. . . . We have neither here. I have just received notice from the city that they have only one coffin left. We shall not receive any more for some time to come. If you want this one you must buy it at once. I know how brave you are, and I thought you would rather have me tell you this."

To think ahead, it is the proof of friendship and of love. Mothers don't wait until their children are born to prepare a cradle for them. I must do as they.

The director is ready to accompany me to the city. He will take me to see the carpenter who deals in these last sheets of zinc, these last planks of oak.

He is a frontiersman, half Lorraine, half Alsatian, cordial and hearty, with an ample figure.

I tell him what has happened to my child as though my own reasons for finding him heroic could modify anything in the making of a coffin. As answer the carpenter wants to explain what excellent materials he uses:

"The oak I am going to give you you could not buy in Paris. It is the finest to be had in French Lorraine, from the mountains, near the village where I was born. If you happen to go there you will hear my family well spoken of, I assure you! . . . 'Boissec! . . . Patriots every one of them! . . . Always ready to open a bottle of wine for a soldier who needs to be refreshed on his march.' Your child could n't be comforted any more by a swallow of wine. But we'll take care of him! You can rely on a Boissec as though you were one of the family yourself! Since 1793, sir, we can count back one hundred and ten Boissecs who have been killed fighting for their country."

I know, my dear man, our generation are not the inventors of trials and sacrifices — other sons have died before mine. But the far-away griefs of these distant ancestors are like the withered leaves of bygone days fallen at the foot of some oak tree. What counts for us is the first verdure of the early spring which spread like a crown over the tree and which offered its shade to the traveller, weary with the labors of the day.

To satisfy this Boissec I comply with all he proposes. I taste his wine, I feel of his timber, I choose the metal mountings he picks out for me. I even accept — Heaven have pity on me! — this overwhelming condition: "When the coffin is ready you will have to take it away at once.... I could n't guard it against the supplications of others who want it as much as you do. If they offered some enormous price, I'd have to let it go. I could only give you your money back. You'll be easier, diable! when you've got the thing in your own keeping!"

You are right, my dear Boissec, I shall be easier. I don't want my child, before the warmth has even left his body, to be placed, naked, under the earth.

XXXVIII

As I was getting into the priest's motor a soldier touched my arm. He has a telegram for me which has been delayed nearly four hours on the way, owing to some error in transmission. It is a despatch from Helen.

She says: "Arrive to-morrow morning with my mother."

I was sure that this brave child would come to bid her fiancée farewell. But "to-morrow morning" is to-day. It is almost ten now and the train was due at eight o'clock.

At the station they say several people have arrived coming from the direction of Paris. No one has noticed a young girl. What has become of these two poor women in the face of the rigorous sentinels? I am so preoccupied about them, my Robert, that I have scarcely time to think of you — of your emotion at seeing "her" again.

The priest's automobile carries me off at top speed.

At the foot of the short cut which mounts abruptly to the hospital gate, I see Helen and her mother. They are on their way back to the town; they walk slowly, one a little behind the other, and without exchanging a word. Each one is plunged in the solitude of her own personal sorrow.

Have they been turned away from the hospital?

No, they have seen him, and this vision has struck Helen like a thunderbolt. Her thoughts are upon the calvary she has just mounted; my tender thanks to her are addressed to an absent soul.

"My own daughter! I shall cherish you always for having brought him this last joy!"

She is not listening to what I say. Her eyes are dull, her arms hang lifeless. She murmurs: "That is n't Robert I saw! . . . That is n't Robert!"

Alas! my dear child, what could you have hoped to find on the crest of the hill yonder? You sped toward some injured dream. . . . You found a dying man.

Her mother says: "You must excuse her. . . . You see how she is suffering."

What must I excuse, my daughter? That you should be grief-stricken? He and you and I, we are three broken-hearted beings.

XXXIX

HELEN weeps.

In the poorly lighted room, where she and I have taken refuge while her mother is unpacking their modest belongings, she weeps. Her tears flow for this happiness that might have been; for the immense suffering she has seen; for her own life which is broken.

"How happy Robert must have been to see you."

"Yes! yes! As happy as he could be. But already he has gone beyond where I can reach him. We see each other, but between us there seems no real contact."

I take her poor hands in mine. She wears the ring which my boy placed on her finger in token of her promise to be his wife. It is a diamond which his mother used to wear as a young woman, and which Robert has had mounted with a setting of rubies.

Helen guesses my thoughts. An expression of anguish crosses her brow. She groans: "Think what he said to me that last night in August, before he left me! 'If God wills that I should not return, my loving wish is that some fine man may come into your life, to protect you, as I have longed to do myself. But he would be grieved to see this ring on your finger. So you won't wear it. But if you ever have a daughter, give it to her, when she is engaged, in memory of our unfulfilled happiness.'"

She wrings her hands and says: "Just now he kept looking and looking at this ring. . . . Ah! why did he say what he did when we were about to part!"

I listen to her and it seems to me I can see our old house, near the forest, the reunion on the day the engagement was announced, when all the young friends were gathered around our table.

That was scarcely three months ago.

I looked out of my window at the chestnut tree in the garden, where, ten years before, I had seen the coffin of my oldest boy.

And I thought to myself: "Soon, now, in the same shadowy spot we shall shelter a cradle. A young mother will be leaning over this new little life beginning. The chain of existence shall be thus continued."

XL

Robert and Helen spend the day alone together. She takes my place giving him water, ice, milk.

Meanwhile, Helen's mother and I stroll about the paths of the garden. Our footsteps sound in the gravel as we pass under our patient's window.

She is calm, this mother of Helen's. So kind, so peaceful. She watches her child's sufferings with something of the astonishment of the Madonnas as they appear in holy pictures. She seems to be saying: "Poor little girl! You supposed that perfect happiness was possible here on earth? You had forgotten my widow's mourning."

She realizes it, this mother: I shall not be any more selfish in my love for her daughter than my poor boy was.

We talk together of Helen as though my son were the outsider, as though she belonged to us both. This melancholy accompaniment seems to suit the sad duet which these two young souls are singing as they sit side by side behind the closed window — behind the smile, which, in their misery, they force themselves heroically to wear. For I understood, from what Helen said, my beloved son keeps the same absolute command of himself with his fiancée as he does always with me.

Does he know that she realizes the truth as clearly as he does? At all events, he will ask no questions.

Between them, until the last moment, they will admit but the certainty of seeing each other again.

The glance he gave me, when, at about four o'clock, I went into his room, followed by Helen's mother, showed me his determination on this subject. So, all three, silently, we obey this unspoken rule, like the soldiers who came to his rescue when he fell on the hillside, and to whom he commanded: "Return to the firing-line!"

XLI

THE big ward which is beyond the little hallway into which Robert's room opens is full of wounded who are kept isolated: all those who can go no farther, those whom they don't want to have die among their comrades in some cattle train.

So near the battlefield these poor hopeless cases receive no visits. They must content themselves with dictating a few letters, or having read to them the answers when they are able to listen to them.

I am so wrung with pity for their loneliness that I beg Helen not to come through this ward. So, to reach Robert's room, we go around the tall building, we keep close to the walls where no one can see us, as though we were going to some clandestine meeting. But these poor fellows found out that the lieutenant, their comrade, had a dear visitor. They sent me word by Big Louis that they longed to have this young girl come through their ward. They said: "We're so glad that some one can have a little happiness."

By what miracle, O God! do you thus enrich the human heart, burying the egoism which seemed to be withering up the face of the earth, bringing back into your light the seed of brotherly love?

I feel it, with an emotion that is overwhelming; the young girl whom these lonely creatures long to see pass before their eyes is not a mother, or a wife. She is the betrothed who shall have no wedding, the dream which shall remain a dream, the symbol of what might have been, the pure love wherein each one of these dying men seeks the reflection of some fleeting memory, dear to his heart.

XLII

It was to-night that Helen bade him good-bye.

Both of them, until this last agony, have maintained toward each other their generous effort at control. There has been no mention made of any final separation. My child — so brave himself — had made a good choice. How can I not weep over the child who might have been theirs!

So we talk of the reunion . . . his return to Paris.

"As soon as I can be moved," he says, "Helen has promised that she will send a motor for me. I shall be carried directly to the hospital at Neuilly. She will be waiting for me there."

The look in his eyes is almost ecstatic as he pronounces these words. "She will be waiting for me."

At that time he will have drunk of the waters whose murmurings he already hears.

He will have quenched there his thirst, appeased his sufferings. She will come to him, more ethereal than her wedding veil. She will have in her hands the flowers that never fade. And they shall be forever united in Glory.

XLIII

"To get away . . ."

This was the fixed idea which possessed him when his soldiers picked him up on the battlefield. How agonized his expression was when he said to me himself: "I want to try to get home!"

Since Helen left, he has been haunted by the same thought. During the ever briefer moments when he is under the influence of morphine, "to get away" means "to recover with the care of his beloved fiancée."

When the poison is no longer active, he faces the future again deliberately. Then "to get away" means "to go back to Paris, to fall asleep on Helen's shoulder."

As his confidant, I telegraph to the Minister of War, I pay visits to the civil and military authorities, I go on errands, I beg, I entreat, that, when the time comes, I may take him away from here, not as my thinking, feeling son, still alive, but all there is left of him, between the planks of oak.

The Minister sends me his affectionate condolences, but until the end of the war no one can use the railroad for such purposes. The prefect says I can go by the road when the lead coffin has been sealed, the oak cover screwed down. "But you and I," he adds, "know neither the day nor the hour. So we must place the body temporarily in a tomb here. And for that you must ask the municipal authorities."

The body!

I want "the body"!

The major says "Yes," with tears in his eyes. He advises me to go to the cemetery to arrange things with the guardian of the tombs; with the grave-digger!

I have just come back from there. I saw the place. So, when, my child, you say to me: "What trouble you are taking for me! . . . Have you succeeded?" I can answer truthfully: "You will be able to leave."

XLIV

I HAD helped you, my boy, to make the arrangements for your wedding. From my own belongings I had selected the souvenirs most directly connected with my forefathers. I was so happy to think that I should see them in the home you were to found.

You will not be able to take them with you where you go, and to-day, other thoughts preoccupy me.

My child, you shall not be laid away unshrouded in the earth; but I hope for better than this assurance.

I want a pillow to place under your head.

In town, every day, for an hour or two, the military authorities allow the shopkeepers to push aside the shutters from the show windows which used to be well stocked. Long before the shop door opens, groups of soldiers have gathered. They are in from the trenches. They hold in their hands a list of the errands they have been asked to do. Every one wants flannels and woollens to comfort him in the rainy dug-outs. In your letters, my boy, you spoke of a certain "splendid violet muffler" of which you were proud.

I stand in line with these valiant young men, covered with mud, happy to be still alive. When, at last, it is my turn, I ask for a pillow cover.

The shopkeeper lifts her arms in astonishment.

"Could you," I ask, "sell me two handkerchiefs? . . . Not too coarse and of the same size?"

"Muslin? . . . That is something which the poilus don't often ask for."

So I find what I want. I can sew the two handkerchiefs together. Between them I can slip some wool, bought at a drug shop. Your head, in this way, Robert, won't rest against the lead.

I must have a flag too. I want to wrap you up in it. You have died for the flag.

I found one as I wanted. A friendly hand offered to sew the pillow, and now I have these two treasures beside me in my cellar room. I see them when I close my eyes at night. I see them in the morning when I awake. They lie there on the shelf; I have no cupboard. I am always conscious of their presence.

XLV

Every evening, when the head nurse has given the last hypodermic which keeps our patient quiet for the night, I creep out of the room on tiptoe and cross over the garden.

On the other side of the flower bed I knock at the door of a little cottage.

I go to pay a visit to the colonel who fell, in a similar bayonet attack, the day after Robert, on the same hill, leading his regiment.

His eyes very bright, his mustache grown long, as he lies there on his pillow he looks like such a leader as Neuville would have chosen as a model.

The colonel was born in one of the French islands in the Indian Ocean. On the various battlefields of Africa and Asia he has played a rôle inspiring to his men. He does not know, and no one knows, if he can survive the wound made by a bullet in his chest, which entered just above his Legion of Honor Cross.

The colonel married late. On the bed where he lies he thinks of his young wife, of his little children, of the son who sends his love, written in a laborious copy-book hand, the sight of which brings tears to this heroic soldier's eyes.

I like to sit down beside the little table laden with cups and medicine glasses. I like to write for him what he wants to dictate to me, for his young wife and his children.

Then we talk together about my boy.

Even before I came the colonel asked every day for news of his young neighbor. There is an atmosphere of camaraderie. So much heroism and the constant presence of death seem to do away with all grades.

The colonel relates to me our battle as he saw it.

When he knew that, with no previous cannonading, he was asked to send his soldiers on for a bayonet attack upon a thoroughly well-defended position, this chief felt as chagrined as a horseman who is forced to send his thoroughbred over some insurmountable obstacle.

He says: "I went to find the major in the middle of the night. I entreated him to postpone the attack for several hours, to wait at least for the protection of darkness until the next night. They promised to forward my request to the chiefs higher up. But our action, no doubt, was only part of a general plan. We were needed just there. At noon the order came to attack . . ."

There is a moment's silence. Then the colonel concludes: "They were right, of course. To-day we command the position."

He does not think, he does not say: "At what a cost!"

Nor does my child.

Nor do I.

XLVI

To-day Robert received a visit from the sergeant major who has been sent by the paymaster to bring him his last salary.

On the threshold, this soldier salutes. He keeps his hand lifted rather longer than usual, because, instead of receiving him standing, the lieutenant is there stretched out flat on his bed.

This sergeant major is a true official. He represents the Administration, a power which must never commit an injustice nor show any feeling.

He says: "Lieutenant, I wish to give you what is due."

My patient stretches out his hand to his visitor. On his lips there is a fleeting smile: "My pay! . . . Why, of course! . . . I had forgotten it. . . ."

To pay is a duty. The sergeant major is the mechanism which accomplishes this duty.

He answers gravely: "Lieutenant, there are officers and soldiers who have wives, children. They claim part of the pay. They should not be made to wait."

There was a silence. Robert has lowered his eyes, and the sergeant major concludes: "I am to give you your pay in your own hands."

He spreads out a little blue paper, a few silver pieces, some coppers, on the bed. He has done what he came for. But he is very scrupulous. He seems to feel the Government owes something more to this dying man.

Always correct, but almost tenderly, he says: "Has the lieutenant heard the news?"

"What news?"

"The lieutenant has been mentioned in the despatches."

"Of our brigade?"

"Of the army."

This is the true payment, for the son, like his ancestors, cherishes honor.

He asks: "Do you know what mention was made?"

"I do not," answers the sergeant major.

"I hope I shall hear," adds my boy.

The sergeant major leaves, prolonging his salute even further than when he came in.

For a moment Robert weighs in his hand the little sum of money laid on the bed.

Then he says: "The price of blood is not heavy. . . . But it is what it is. . . . You must put this aside. When Marie-Rose marries, you must buy her a present with it, a present from me. . . . Your present, I can offer you to-day, if what the sergeant major says is true."

XLVII

When exhaustion overcomes him and suddenly he lowers his eyes, I can no longer remain seated. I have to get up to lean over him, to watch him. If, now and then, he did not wrinkle his brow, to drive away the flies that torment him, I might almost think he will never wake.

Gaze at him, poor man, and try to grow accustomed to this thought: he will look like this when the struggle is over!

In the arms of Death Triumphant I see a transfigured Robert.

It is he, and yet it is still more you, my son Guy, whom I see; as you used to look when I walked between you, happy to hear people say as we passed, "They seem to be three brothers!" — as you looked in the peace of your final sleep.

At that moment, my first-born child, you had grown so like me in appearance that it was no longer you, but myself, at the age of twenty, lying there. You wanted to leave this heritage to my grief:

"I was you, even more than you dreamed."

Oh! my sons, why, in dying, do you wear the look of my youth? Is it because, in this vision, you wish to show me the child to which your lost love shall never give birth?

This is the lesson I learn: We three are but a single being, multiplied for an instant, and drawn close again to return to God.

XLVIII

THE soldier who guards the hospital gate stopped me just now on my way. This humble fellow is wrapped up in his little girl, a child about twelve years old. Standing by his side, she watches placidly the wounded being brought in, the dead being carried out.

For her they are merely the guests coming or going whom she greets in passing, stopping a moment some game to smile or to make the sign of the cross.

The good man is embarrassed when he sees me. I feel I must encourage him.

"Sir," he says, "it's Boissec. . . . You know, the carpenter from town? . . . He gave me a message for you. . . . He has finished the work. . . . He would like to deliver it as soon as possible. . . . It seems you agreed to this?"

"Yes, I did."

"Then . . . he can bring it up to-morrow morning? . . ."

And the poor fellow adds in a low tone: "Where shall I have them put it?"

Near me, of course, with the other relics, the flag, the pillow: I have reached the point where it is almost a comfort to be thus sure of having a coffin for my son before he is dead. Now I am certain that his poor, wretched body will not receive directly the weight of the earth upon it.

In my misery I am happier than thousands of other fathers, who will see before them only an irregular field, and who will not know where to kneel, if they want to say a prayer.

XLIX

The director has been promising me for some time to show me the portraits of his two little children. He is sorry that a ray of sunlight, which mars the photograph, prevents my seeing how pretty his young wife is.

While I am looking at these charming pictures, the paymaster brings me the mail. I recognize on one of the envelopes my brother-in-law Eugène's writing. He is surgeon now in a railroad station near the front, where thousands of wounded pass through his hands.

I tell the director the pretty story of how this young doctor happened to become one of our family.

Twenty-four years ago (Robert was about three years old then) our household was stricken with croup. My two children had bad cases. We did not yet know, we, the mothers and fathers, the blessed remedy with which to combat and quell this malady at its start. Minute by minute we had to fight suffocation.

The great specialist whom I had summoned to our aid said to me: "Here are the name and address of one of my assistants. I hope he will be able to leave his studies to come and stay here in the house. It will be the only chance of saving your children."

I can never forget my search through the Latin Quarter, from one street to another. Finally I reached a student lodging-house, where, in the days when I was preparing for my examinations at the Sorbonne, I myself had stayed.

In the very room where I had burned the midnight oil chance would have it that I should find this young man to whom I looked to save us.

He was polite, speaking only common sense, no doubt: "I am preparing for the competition to become interne," he said. "I can't throw up my work like this."

"Eight years ago," I answered him, "I was seated behind this very table. . . . I would have said exactly what you are saying; I did n't know then what I have learned since in becoming a father. You, too, some day, will know what this paternal affection is. Then you will be sorry that you thrust aside my anguish. Moreover, it is not only because you love Science that you have chosen the profession of doctor? You want to relieve suffering humanity? . . . Come now to the assistance of a father who can't see his sons die."

He listened to me. He came with me. It was a terrible epidemic in the household. One after the other the two children, their mother, one of my brothers, one of my sisters, were infected with the disease, which we fought for two months.

We were the victors, and, as a recompense for such hours of mortal misery, we saw the dawning of a young love.

My sister Marie-Louise was then in her twentieth year, and very charming. As her hands smoothed the pillows of our poor sufferers, they had encountered the doctor's hands, joined with them. So, after the period of convalescence, we celebrated a love marriage.

The happiness of the young couple seemed to radiate farther than the old provincial church and the circle of friends who had accompanied them thither. It reached as far as those who long to hear a happy ending to a tragic story.

"To-day," I say to the director, "my brother-in-law Eugène's only son, his 'Charles,' is fighting. 'Our Charles' is a lieutenant, twenty-two years old. He has passed his law examinations brilliantly, graduated from the School of Political Science. What a shock it must have been to Eugène when he learned that the last of the children whose lives he saved years ago is now dying in my arms, and that even his experience could do nothing for us!"

I open the envelope which the paymaster handed me.

Ah, God! . . . You can spare no one! . . . Charles has been killed,[1] shot through the heart a few miles from the spot where his cousin fell, on the other side of the Moselle. He had sprung out of the trenches to lead on his men.

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[1] Lieutenant Charles Didier, killed in action, September 22, 1914.

This is the end. The end! In both branches of the family! My father has lost his last grandson.

For a moment I cannot take it in or believe it. It is too much — too much!

L

The letter from Charles's father has lain all day in my coat pocket. It seemed to burn my breast when Robert asked me as usual if there were no news from his friends at the front, from his cousin, who was like a brother, and who, on his wedding day, was to have been his best man.

To decipher these poor lines I waited until night, until I was alone in my cellar room.

So, my poor Eugène, it was for this that twenty-four years ago I came to hunt you out before your work-table and bring you into my house!

I said to you: "Later you will understand how profound this love is for one's own son."

You listened to me. You came with me. Toward what fate?

To-day I read your letter within a few

feet of the very coffin in which I am waiting to lay my last son, and you, you have been on to the battlefield to disinter your boy.

For two long days and two long nights you were searching for him in the grass, for this beloved child, searching under the rain of bullets. You were sent back and forth from those who did not know where to take you, to those whose indifference failed to grasp your determination. You wore your eyes out making out the names already growing dim on the wooden crosses. You felt your heart sink before these nameless tombs. And when at last you knew in which direction to guide your steps, you did as I, you made friends of those who could help you realize your hope. The old carpenter who agreed to make you a coffin in the night hours; the cartman who harnessed his horse in the darkness; the village priest who gave you a sheet; the sergeant who shouldered his gun to show you the way; the soldiers your son had commanded, and who set out with you before dawn to find the hillside, and the spot where the soil was overturned.

Each word in your letter, each one of your thoughts, poor father, finds an echo in my heart. You write:

"I walked on, my eyes fixed on the woods of Selouze. We reached a clump of shrubs, two hundred mètres farther on another cluster of bushes, quite near the place where my child had been shot down. The sergeant showed the way with a steady step. He led me to the trench which Charles had occupied the previous day. A little heap of earth, a little cross made of two branches. It was there. Charles and I were together again.

"I noticed that the men were waiting for an order from me. I said: 'Go ahead!'

"With their shovels they began throwing up the earth. Gently, respectfully, the soldiers dug all about the grave. . . . First a red spot appeared.

"'Stop!' I cried.

"I brushed away the dirt with my hands.

Little by little I uncovered the legs in their new red trousers. I lifted them up. I freed them. The cloak had been thrown over the head and shoulders.

"The body was entirely outlined now. It was covered with blood; the earth, too, had been soaked with it. It had flowed from the bullet hole in the chest.

"I could not yet distinguish the face, but I could see his poor feet with their heavy boots, hobnailed, clumsy, and his hands with their slender fingers, thin, wrinkled, already withered.

"We dragged him to the edge of the grave. I lifted up the cloak. Poor little Charles!

"It was his pale, fine face, his straight nose, his full mouth. Death had respected his features. But what an unknown expression he wore! His head was thrown back as though defiantly in a moment of supreme effort. His face had a look of savage energy. He had aged twenty years in the moment of combat.

"I was overwhelmed. I kissed him for

his poor mother, for his sister, for myself. My tears fell upon his forehead.

"Meanwhile the sun had risen; the mist had turned into a fine rain; the shells had begun to fall again. I had to leave if I did not want to add new grief to this grief. The soldiers placed the body on a litter and we started on our way.

"I walked by his side, holding his hand in mine, the hand of my boy, so cold now. We were close together again as we used to be in the days when we dreamed about the future."

The letter is longer still, but I shall read no more to-night.

My little Charles, I shall not tell Robert that you have fallen. He was counting upon you to console me. The thought that you, too, have left us would grieve him too sorely, however glorious your end.

But to-morrow how happy he is going to be to find you on the other side, between Guy and Jean! In the joy of your reunion, my dear children, don't forget those who have loved you so deeply here below, and who must finish their days without you.

Charles, Robert, you must forgive me if just now I was rebellious. Have you not fallen, dear sons, to teach us fathers that sacrifice is not measured by reason?

LI

Every evening, toward six o'clock, the cathedral, deserted and silent during the day, becomes peopled with moving shadows; soldiers who pass, valiant fellows sent back from the trenches for a short rest.

A few candles placed in the side chapels, on an altar, break the depth of gloom. A little light under a lamp-shade illumines a hymnal. A few rays reach as far as the vaulted roof: they touch up the brass of a chandelier, the gold of a faded banner, the fringe of a flag. At the foot of the pillars it is as dark as the forest in night-time.

Among these trees of stone, under the leaves of the capitals, a group of people stand, silent, immovable. Is it in my imagination that these cloaks exist, stiff with mud, their long folds hanging straight? Is it the dim light in which these shaggy heads appear? Is it the intensity of these thoughtful faces? In the semi-darkness these men seem less to be living than to be some statues of the Middle Ages; figures on a church door, weary with standing so long erect in all weathers, outside the church, and who have come to seek shelter in the cathedral and to bear witness to their own martyrdom, their resignation.

It is a motley crowd: people who have faith, those who have none, men whose hands have been always joined in prayer, strong-minded men who have mocked at the idea of another life. They are all together here now, those who just have escaped death, those who are going back to face death.

Absorbed in the same deep thought, they listen to the military chaplain, who, at the foot of the altar, recites the evening prayer first, followed by the prayer for the dead. A song sounds forth, accompanied by a few chords on the harmonium. The voices are full and steady. From the mute crowd there goes up suddenly the ancient cry of suffering humanity:

"Out of the depths have I cried unto thee,
O Lord.
"Lord, Lord, hear my voice . . ."

I wait until the end of the service to speak to the priest officiating. He had been at the hospital during the day, passing souls in review. He seems, this military priest, less a priest clad in his frock than a Saint George, with spurs and armor.

He said to me: "Your son is ready."

He speaks as a military instructor might speak of his recruits: "They are prepared."

His faith radiates like a halo. He has long since passed the moment when one makes compromises with the hesitating, when one encourages vain regrets. He is an archangel, with rigid features, standing on the threshold of Paradise.

He thrusts open the door with his lance. He orders you to enter.

LII

AFTER supper the head surgeon says to me: "Let us go to see the lieutenant."

It was in response to his orders that I have given up the pleasure of visiting my child every evening, to kiss his damp brow before entering upon the night. They are afraid I may arouse him from the torpor which, for a few hours, plunges him into forgetfulness. So this sudden invitation startles me. I wonder, trembling. I ask myself: "Is he worse?"

The head surgeon lights a lantern. He leads the way across the hospital garden. In the middle of the path he stops: "It will not be to-morrow. But I advise you to keep within call."

We pass through the ward where all is in darkness. The head surgeon stops here and there, letting the light from his lantern fall upon some pillow where it shows a tortured face, the eyes closed. He reads the fever chart nailed on the wall. He shakes his head and we pass on.

Now we are in the hallway into which the officers' rooms open. In the silence a voice, unknown to me, calls out aloud, in a monologue of broken, incoherent words.

The head surgeon listens and says: "It is the lieutenant talking yonder . . . I shall leave you with him a moment. Don't stay longer."

In the dim glow of a night light I perceive my child.

His head is thrown back on his pillow. His throat — so emaciated now — seems so long, so long. The dampness on his brow curls his hair in light tendrils.

He opens his eyes. He looks at me. He does not see me.

"Robert, my child . . ."

"Mamma . . ."

Where is he in his wandering dream? In the room where, in their childhood, his mother came to cover him and his brother in their beds, commending them in her simple Italian faith to the angels whom she believed to be hovering over them?

Fearing, as he does, to give way to some emotion so deep that he could not regain possession of himself, not once has this son of ours, since I have been nursing him, pronounced before me his mother's name.

Impulsively I say: "Robert, dear . . . you never speak to me of your mother . . ."

He has gone too far from me. He does not see me, he does not hear me, he does not answer. On his lips I see the faintest smile. He says: "She comes to me in the night!"

LIII

Does he remember my visit to him?

Does he want to answer my appeal and leave with me some last message for those nearest his heart?

This morning he says to me, nervously, his teeth almost closed: "There is something I want to beg you to do about my friend Jacques. You know how fond I am of him! . . . We entered the School of Chemistry together; we were graduated side by side. Ever since I have been working at the factory, not a day has passed that he has not come in the evening to smoke a cigarette with me on the couch, on Rue de Rivoli. In the summer-time, when I had a few days' vacation, I liked to spend them with him and his mother in their villa at the seaside. When he used to come to lunch with us, in our house, near the forest, I was so happy. He knew all my hopes, my plans. I knew his. . . . It is about one of these mutual secrets that I want to say a word."

In the pictures which daily I like to evoke before my poor child, two young couples appear and reappear, Helen and himself, his friend Jacques and Helen's sister. These two are slightly more in the background — not quite distinct. But the desire he has to see these two together is not the only reason why they lean one toward the other.

It was to Marie-Thérèse that Robert first spoke of his love for Helen; it was she whom he took as confidante to serve his interests.

I have read the letters in which this charming child tried to comfort him at a moment when he was not yet certain of his happiness.

And Jacques, of course, his friend, played a part in the naïve conspiracy. When he danced with Helen he had the mission of telling her how much he admired his friend.

Such games of love can't be played with

impunity when one is twenty. So the spark was soon fanned to a flame.

I say now, without surprise: "Your friend Jacques is attached to Marie-Thérèse?"

"He loves her . . ."

"And she . . .?"

"She loves him too. I am sure of it, only she won't admit it yet. Jacques needs me to plead his cause as I needed him to plead mine with Helen. I hate to fail my best friend at such a critical moment. This is why I have turned to you . . ."

He smiles. He sees the two young couples who might have traversed life together, as they danced together the winter before. Before his fleeting fancy has changed from joy to melancholy, he begs me: "You will speak well of Jacques to Helen's mother, won't you? . . . Say everything I would have said had I been able, so that Marie-Thérèse and he can marry and so that two of us at least may be happy." [1]

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[1] Married, January 13, 1915.

LIV

"AND now I must say a word about Marie-Rose."

Robert has loved this little sister, ten years younger than he, with the greatest tenderness. When she was at the age of mud pies and wooden shovels, he used to leave his favorite books to go down into the garden and play with her. He would take her into the stable, show her how to hold her hand out quite flat when she gave a bit of carrot to my horse, or a pinch of tobacco to the gazelle, which he had called, and of which she was afraid.

When Guy's death left him alone with this sister, the bonds of affection grew stronger between them. He seemed to say to her: "You have lost one of your cavaliers, but I am still here. . . . I will protect you."

When, after that, Marie-Rose lost her mother, this brotherly attachment became almost fierce. And so it went on until the moment when the image of another young girl came to fill a greater place in his heart than the first affection which for eighteen years had absorbed him.

To-day it seems as though a veil were being lifted. For the first time he seems to realize that a sister, who had so long been cherished, may have suffered when she saw that she no longer held the first place in her brother's thoughts, and that she had been obliged to give way before another queen.

"Dear Rosette," he says. "How nice she was about my engagement! She seemed happy at seeing me happy! And how unselfish of her to let Helen come to me, since the regulations of the fortress are so severe that I could not have the joy of seeing them both."

He talks on and on, quickly, and though his mind works clearly his words succeed each other rapidly, confusedly, on his lips.

"I must tell you," he says, "when I saw Rosette for the last time! . . . You remember she was staying with my uncle and aunt at Mont Fortin? Before going to spend my vacation with Helen I had gone to say a word of greeting to the others. The morning I left she came with me on to the terrace which overlooks the whole horizon, the town, the river, the church spires, the meadows. It was a sunny July day. The flower beds in the gardens were wonderfully sweet. We looked out together over the distant view and we kissed each other fondly. I am so happy to have said good-bye to Rosette in that beautiful light. . . . She will always think of me now as blessed."

LV

All day he has been tortured. He thinks his engagement has been broken.

"On account of the state I am in, you understand?" he says.

I hold his two hands in mine to help him in fighting the phantoms that are closing in around him.

"How Helen would suffer," I say, "if she knew that you had lost confidence in her."

"Of course . . . of course. . . . It is not her fault."

Staring vacantly into the air he seems to see the cause of this new misery; but I cannot drive the look of anguish from his brow.

He no longer believes now that he has been mentioned in despatches.

"You have n't received any notification," he asks. "Nothing official! . . . Neither have I. . . . If the sergeant major was just saying all that to please me . . ."

"My poor child," I answer, "don't worry. It is true, of course. . . . This is the least honor that could be given one who has done what you have done."

"Then let them make haste."

His suffering is terrible, worse than any agony caused by his wound, worse than the horror of dying.

Toward evening he says to me: "Forgive me! . . . There are moments in the day when the devil amuses himself by showing me his magic lantern . . ."

Then suddenly he seems relieved; he seems natural again. My love seems to touch him, to dispel the shadows once more.

Inconsolable, he pronounces these words, which shall be my consolation: "How kind you are to me . . ."

LVI

He and I keep a close watch for the brief little moments when he can master his remaining strength. I stand then at the foot of his bed and he dictates a letter to Helen. We stop after each sentence, often after each word, and for a long time. He does n't want to be helped, he knows what he wishes to say.

When we have come to the bottom of the page I draw near to him and show him the paper. He tries to read what is written on it, and he signs it, with three letters, which spell the nickname she used to give him.

Every day it grows harder for him to trace these three letters, for his arm can no longer control his fingers. When he has succeeded, he kisses the place and he watches me seal the message while the dampness moistens his brow.

To-day he said to me: "Put the exact date."

And we waited almost a quarter of an hour, he with a vacant stare, I with my hand ready to take down what he might have to say.

At last he dictated:

"My dear wife . . ."

It is the farewell letter. It is not long. He wants to repeat one last time:

"Forever and forever."

My hands tremble almost as violently as his when I show him this letter to sign. He tries once, twice, ten times. It is too much for him. What he scrawls at the foot of the page is meaningless.

He looks at me to see what my impression is; then, more deliberately than usual, he presses his burning lips to the signature.

I had brought him the last autumn flowers gathered in the hospital garden. He kisses them too. He wants me to slip one into the envelope; when this is done he says: "How I hope this letter will not be lost."

He watches me place it in my wallet. His thought follows it on to its journey's end; he sees it in Helen's hands. He knows that her lips will touch the spot he has touched with his dying lips. He lowers his eyes as receiving this farewell kiss.

I wait.

His eyes are open again. They have in them a look of peace.

He says resolutely: "And now, don't speak to me of Her again."

LVII

YESTERDAY he bade adieu to the dream of his youth, but in the calm with which he waits for death, he still keeps a place for the affection of bygone days.

He asks me: "My mother taught me how to read in the 'Contes de Perrault.' Could you get them here, do you think?"

The caprices of the dying have to be obeyed. But what can I do! I cannot leave him now long enough to go down to the town. And by what chance could I find here, in this house of suffering, where we live, these fairy-stories?

The janitor's daughter happens to have them; they were given to her as a prize at school, an edition adapted for children, with certain pages left out. It seems like a miracle, just the same. He can scarcely believe it is true when he sees me sitting beside his bed with the book in my hands.

"Dear son," I ask, "which one of these stories do you want me to read first?"

He remembers his emotion, as a little child, when he heard the adventures of Blue Beard and Little Red Riding Hood. He does n't want to hear about wicked people. He answers me in a way that overwhelms me: "Read me only the stories that have a happy ending."

So we shall invoke the dream of the Love that nothing discourages, neither maledictions, nor curses, nor the thickets of an impassable forest: "The Sleeping Beauty."

"Once upon a time there was a princess . . ."

I read on and on . . .

"You're not getting tired, my child?"

"No! no! Go on."

The time passes. I stop a moment. We can hear the ticking of my watch. No one is stirring on the path under our windows. Everything about us seems to have decided to contribute to this silence, this reverie.

So I read on and on.

He does not seek the meaning of the words. He enjoys them as one would music. Above my voice he hears another voice calling him.

"It was during the winter we spent at Bordighera, after the croup. Mamma used to read aloud to us in the evenings. She had hung 'toiles de Gênes' all around the room. They represented palms, flowers, trees, palaces, ships: things as wonderful as in any fairy-story!"

I read on and on. I read until the page of glory which crowns all these dreams with the supreme happiness accorded to lovers here below:

"They lived to be very old, and had a great many children."

LVIII

Big Louis, who comes to call me in the morning, is the bearer of bad news.

"Sir," he says, "the lieutenant is bad! He has been talking all night and we can't quiet him."

I am out of bed with a bound.

Yes, the lieutenant is bad, indeed, as bad as possible! Last night was our last moment of intimacy, when our souls were still in touch. How sweet it was!

The lieutenant has the tense expression of one who is struggling hand to hand with a foe against whom he must defend himself. Death has deceived herself if she thinks she can fell him without his resisting.

His soul, yesterday still so conscious, has made the sacrifice, but his youth still fights for life.

I can do nothing but offer him a drink now and then, or wipe the moisture from his face, and watch this struggle as it progresses.

The head surgeon came at ten o'clock. He looked at the lieutenant a moment. He clasped my hand in his, he turned to the nurse and said: "Don't leave him now."

At all costs he must get away from his bed of torture. There are moments when my voice calms him. There are others when he falls back on his pillows and breathes as loudly as a frightened horse. He looks at the ceiling, at his bed, at the closed door, at the barred windows. He does n't understand where he is, or why he is here. His lips move, and when I offer him something to drink he pushes it away.

"None of that poison," he says.

The fresh springs where he has dreamed of quenching his thirst have become roaring streams. They flow about the walls, they beat against the bed, they fill his ears with their noise, they roar in his brain.

I had hoped that he might fall asleep without this nightmare, and that he would not strike his brow thus against the portal of death.

LIX

Noon.

He has been talking for two hours, but it is no longer to us that he addresses these hasty confidences which he whispers in a low tone.

I lean over him trying to understand. In vain. Behind his closed teeth there is a dull sound as of pebbles being rolled back and forth when the waves rise and fall.

Outside it is the splendid noonday of October. A radiant light falls from the blue sky above; it gives an intensity to all it touches, to the perfume of the rare autumn flowers. Life is sweet between heaven and earth.

Oh! how cruel it seems to me, my son, the outward beauty of everything which persists, as I watch you, going alone, at midday, into the shadows.

LX

Three o'clock.

He is still lucid. He lifts his haggard face from the pillow; he stares at me.

He still has one question to ask me.

Almost violently he says: "Come, come! She is bigger now, is she not?"

"Who is bigger, dearest?"

He looks at me with terrible intensity, as though all the peace of his life hereafter depended on what I am about to answer him.

He sees that I am unable to grasp what he means. So he makes a supreme effort. He pronounces distinctly the word:

"*France.*"

So it is, my son. You cannot leave us without speaking that name: "France." It is for her I brought you up. To heal the wound inflicted upon her, as your own wound was inflicted on you, so that the little children, who will attend the schools tomorrow may look upon her in her entirety, this France which you and I have known dismembered in the darkness. So that they may say with a smile: "Our older brothers have replaced the crape with a wreath of laurels."

This is what you are dying for, my son. And you want to be sure, before leaving, that you have not given yourself for nothing.

So be it. And since you have no time to wait, I shall advance the hour for you. I tell you the truth as you have made it true for us — you, who are nearing the Truth of God.

Yes! my Robert. You and your companions have given us a bigger France. The shadow that covered Her you have lifted. You have won the victory, vanquished the enemy!

LXI

Six o'clock.

An orderly has just come to say that the colonel, our neighbor, wants to see me immediately.

I find him sitting on his bed. In the dimly lighted room his brilliant eyes seem to glow.

He does not give me time to speak: "The head surgeon has told me. Your boy is the first to go. I want to send him some flowers, and one can find nothing here. You see what I am doing?"

He had ordered the soldier who waits on him to bring him his coat — the one he was wearing on the day of the attack, the one through which the bullet passed just above the heart. With a pen-knife he is carefully cutting off his decorations: poor faded ribbons, they are his emblems of Asia, of Africa, of the dust, the rain, the snow, blood, and glory, such as he has known them in his soldier's life.

When he is through he puts the ribbons in my hand.

"Give these to your son from me," he says. "They don't really mean anything, for these decorations are mine, not his. But they are the things I have cared most about on earth. Give them to him. Let him take them with him."

His fiancée had bidden him the farewell of Love. This is the adieu of Honor.

He is not astonished, this soldier, that I should not try to thank him in words! He wants me, as a father who must soon close the eyes of his son, to keep all my strength for the supreme moment. He knows the only thing that can comfort those whose feelings are deep.

He clasps me in his arms an instant, commanding: "Go back to him now, quickly!"

LXII

Eleven o'clock p.m.

He has ceased talking, he no longer whispers, but for hours he has been singing.

I know these scales. He used to run them over, up and down, when he was a child in arms. We used to listen, delighted, at this song which sprang from his baby throat. We watched for the first lisping syllables which soon would become our names, the sweet names that are a reward in themselves to all mothers and fathers for all their care. He seemed to realize then that he was accomplishing some great miracle, as his soul ventured thus, like a ship, upon the unknown seas, toward all that the future might hold in store for him here below.

Now his eyes closed, his arms inert, lying here devoured by his wound, he chants in his failing voice I know not what Service for the Dead.

LXIII

Night has closed in upon us. They have lighted the lamps in Robert's room. The head nurse is at his bedside. She occupies the vacant place there.

How he has changed during the few moments I was away from him!

I draw near to him, saying: "Robert, the colonel doesn't want you to wait any longer for the reward you have been promised; he has sent you the ribbons of his decorations."

And I place this treasure on his outstretched hands.

His brows are lifted slightly; his face shows astonishment, joy. He seems to say: "These are for me? I don't deserve them!"

And upon his lips, already contracted in death, there is a happy smile, the last one.

LXIV

Midnight.

Some one knocks at the door. Big Louis opens.

It is a soldier-priest whom I have often seen in the big wards. He says to me: "The other day I visited your son on my rounds. He spoke to me of a brother whom he loved very much, and who has gone before him to heaven. I have come now in memory of that brother."

He goes to the bedside, and kneeling down in his blue cloak, he murmurs a prayer.

I follow him with all my soul.

"O God, our Father, hidden from us beyond this world, this child whom you are taking spoke your name reverently, with faith. To shelter his young love, so pure, he longed for your Kingdom here on earth. He has responded without a murmur to the dictates of your will. He has never spoken a word of anger against the enemy who shot him down and who rejoiced to see him fall. He knows that when he has gone I shall fold my hands before my daily bread and that I shall be ashamed to touch it. In answer to such submission, such suffering, protect him. O God, protect me from the temptation that hovers between You and Death. Silence the Voice that cries out: 'Faith, Justice, Duty, One's Country, Honor? All were but the irony of Evil triumphant!'"

The soldier closes his prayer with ardor. On the brow which is growing cold, on the hands which are stiffening, on the heart which has loved so, he makes the sign of the cross. He looks at me, and he sees that I, too, am nailed upon my cross.

His charity envelops the one who is going and the one who must remain. He says to me, as he leaves us: "Let us not be sorrowful like those who are without hope."

LXV

Three o'clock.

It is three o'clock in the morning.

The head nurse says to me: "His pulse seems to have stopped beating."

Godin and Big Louis weep. I take his hands and fold them. I close his eyes.

... There is more I can do for him still.

The rules of the hospital are strict. They forbid his remaining now, vanquished, upon his bed, so near to others for whom the struggle is not yet over. They exact that he shall be taken into a cellar room, the antechamber of the tomb, more frightful than the tomb itself.

Once, as the door swung open, while I was passing, I caught sight of this Hades. I saw the dead lying there in rows, scarcely covered over, waiting on the cold stones until they should be lowered into some grave, common to all.

The head surgeon is here. I say to him:

"Since you have been so kind, in the weary hours of the night, as to bring us the comfort of your presence here, grant us this one favor; don't separate us until our vigil is ended. I promise you, as soon as the day breaks, you shall find this bed empty."

The head surgeon reflects. He is solemn. He asks: "Is the coffin near here?"

"Ready to be carried in at a moment's notice."

"Well, then . . . my fellow surgeons and I will come at eight o'clock to pay our last tribute to the lieutenant."

LXVI

Half-past three.

For hours and hours now, Big Louis, Godin, the head nurse, have been helping us. They have forgotten their own increasing fatigue. They have forgotten that tomorrow another day of labor begins for them.

It is not only pity for him and for me which keeps them up; his courage and my love have kindled deeper feelings in their hearts. They, who have seen so many lonely death agonies, encounter here, as a consolation, the sort of respect which envelops Death in its proper dignity.

The head nurse says to me: "Tied between the shoulder and the elbow of his left arm, there is a black velvet ribbon. When his fiancée was here, I noticed she wore one like it in her hair Shall I leave it?"

She lifts up the coarse linen shirt to show me.

Ah, God! As she does it, he moves.

We had thought his heart had ceased to beat. Life was ended, but not his love. His hands clasped, his eyes closed, thrown back on his pillow, he says "*No!*" with his head. Death, touched by such loyalty as his, lets him return an instant to defend his secret, to pronounce the last words before entering into silence forever.

To this poor woman, so anxious about her own son, who has nursed him as a son, he murmurs: "Thank you!"

To me, whose eyes he may not close, he gives up his soul, with this word on his lips: "Papa!"

And now, it is the peace of Death.

The lamps may be extinguished, the day may dawn, the coffin may be brought in.

LXVII

My three friends have been given his strict orders; not afterward, even, am I to see the wound which has sapped his life.

To obey him now is a last tribute to pay, as though he were living.

I have much to do for him still, for day is breaking and we must make haste. In the little pillow which I have made to put under his head, I shall place his love-letters, the letters from his sister, Marie-Rose, mine, those from his friends. And the portraits which he carried with him always; his mother's, one of Helen, one of his brother Guy, mine, some "snap-shots" made last spring, before he was engaged, when he used to go to the Bois de Boulogne with her, after church, on Sunday; a picture of Helen and himself, standing together under the basket of flowers he sent her the day of their engagement. . . .

This is not the moment to look at these

photographs. I shall see them all, and others, later. There will be time then.

When I return after a moment, our friends have covered his bed with white. They have brought in some flowers, the last of the garden, to place about his head, to scatter over the sheets.

He seems to belong to me now, as never before.

I must not give way to this feeling of peace.

I have made a promise and I must keep it.

Just as we were laying him in the coffin, his eyelids, which I had closed, are lifted. The strange terror which has haunted his eyes, since he has been pursued by tormenting visions, has vanished. Until I cover his face, he seems to look at me with a confiding tenderness, with the eyes of his childhood's days.

We have finished. The pillow is under his head; the ribbons of the colonel's decorations are pinned on his breast, the flowers are spread out over his shroud, "Now give me the flag to cover him. . . ."

"My Robert!"

Why do I call to him thus, since I know he cannot answer me?

Dear friends, who stand about me, we are looking for the last time at his face. I was so happy the day he was born. Come! come! I must show as much courage as he. Let me kiss his brow. I shall see him now only through the flag.

LXVIII

Eight o'clock.

THE head surgeon arrives, followed by the professor from Nancy, and by their colleagues.

They have put on full-dress uniform to bring us their condolences.

In the shadows which envelop the world, these men are like a ray of consolation, through the effort they make, with their science, and with their kindliness, to bind up the agonies which the Power of Evil spreads broadcast.

I want to express to them my gratitude:

"Gentlemen," I say, "with this son, to whom your compassion pays tribute here, my name dies out. It dies well, thanks to him. As for you, you have assisted him until the last beat of his poor heart. I thank you as well. For him, and for myself, for his ancestors before him, for the mothers and those who love and who are too far away in their anguish, to show you their gratitude, I thank you.

"It is because of your care that so many wounded, who seemed lost, are able to rise up from their beds. It is you who quiet the sufferings of those who must go to the end of their torment.

"For this precious gift of your learning, and your brotherly tenderness, may you be rewarded through those you love."

The head surgeon looks for a moment at the coffin, then he answers: "We shall keep the memory of your son with those we cherish most in our hearts."

And the professor from Nancy adds: "We doctors weep for him."

LXIX

The almoner sends me word that he is going off on his bicycle to give the last sacraments to some dying man in a neighboring village. He can't come to us before four in the afternoon.

So I begin the watch by my boy's side.

Above his head I have placed the cap he had on when they picked him up. It has the blue coiffe over it. The number of his regiment is embroidered there in the threads of gold which a little village girl, in August, had unravelled from some braid. Hidden underneath is the number of his former regiment, the one he left voluntarily in order to be, from the first instant, as near as possible to the front.

Across his chest I have laid his sword. The sheath was twisted under him as he fell, the blade broken.

The head nurse, Godin, Big Louis, have

left me to go to other sufferers. I am alone with him and with my memories.

I can see him playing about me, as he did when he was a little child, in his sailor suit. He spends the winters on the Mediterranean, where his convalescence is assured by a princely hospitality, extended at the same time, and proudly, to a king.

Before the door of this sovereign, my little sailor boy stands guard. The king, as he comes out, returns the salute of this little child, as solemn as though he were accomplishing a great duty.

Now, again, we are together on our farm in Algiers. I have turned the granary into a riding-school where I teach him to ride. He clings to the bareback horse whose mane fairly covers him as he gallops around.

Then he goes to spend a year with his mother and his brother in Germany.

He travels in England. He speaks the languages of these two countries like his own. He reads Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, and yet, before me, he always remains silent. I say to him: "My dear Robert, are you afraid of me?"

He answers that it is out of respect.

He attaches no importance to himself, nor to his wishes. He looks upon his brother as a superior officer who decides upon the plan of campaign and tells him what he is to do. The day this beloved brother vanished from his vision, he said to us: "How much better if it could have been I!"

And on his face I see an expression of terror, of shame that he should still be living.

Now he is a youth, almost arrived at manhood. He is about to be graduated as chemical engineer from the School of Chemistry.

One day while he and his companions are handling some inflammable substance in a wooden shed, a fire breaks out. All make a rush to get away. Some one runs to the back of the laboratory and cuts off the gas to avoid an explosion. It is Robert. He always bears the marks on his face of a slight burn which scarred him that day, and which grows scarlet when the air is cold.

Another day, during a vacation which he spent at the seashore in Brittany, in the middle of the morning bath, a cry of distress rises above the shouts of general merriment; a young man and a young girl have got beyond their strength in deep water. A vigorous arm swims out to their rescue. After diving and bringing them to the shore this anonymous person is greeted with the bravos of the crowd. It is Robert again. He does n't want his mother to be anxious thinking that her last son is in danger. We hear of this act of bravery several days later, by chance, when we see the mother of the two imprudent young people rush up to thank him in the street.

So it was.

He was as modest as he was courageous.

Oh! how wonderful it would be if things were happening now as our ancestors used to suppose, if his mother, his brother, his young comrades, were able to greet him in the other world, if, between their joy, hidden from me and my grief, there were only the space of the blue heavens!

Whatever may be the reality, as you have planned it, O God, you cannot but open the way to such a simple heart!

LXX

Half-past four p.m.

The priest has taken him. Our friends were gathered about the gate; they bade us farewell.

It was raining early this morning. Now the sky is lowering; as night draws near the air is chilly.

At the top of the short cut by which we descend in spite of the sharp turning, because it is growing late and we must hurry, two colonels are stationed, in full-dress uniform.

They salute their young comrade, they clasp my hand, and they join our little procession.

The commanding general of the Staff, the governor-general of the fort, have sent them as a mark of honor. The director is there, too; he represents the hospital. He wanted to go with me to the end. I walk ahead, alone, close to my boy.

Before going down into the sunken road, I look once more about me.

Here are the hills upon which his eyes rested as they were carrying him to the summit of his calvary. Below us lies the town with its historic church spires; and there, to the right, at the foot of the slope, are the barracks from which he dated the letters he wrote us during the first weeks of the campaign.

Some soldiers are exercising in the yard. The sound of a trumpet reaches us. It comes faintly from the distance which makes everything look small.

Is it aloud that I cry in agony or is it only my soul that calls out to the soldiers below: "My son is dead!"

So I follow him. I wanted him to be set down for a moment before the little chapel outside the fortifications, which seems to have been thrust here on to the roadway in order to bless the dead as they pass. A pause of ten minutes will not make us late.

How heartrending is that groaning of a

coffin as it glides from the hearse to the shoulders of the pallbearers. Yet, I have no desire to stop my ears, to close my eyes. It is my son whom they are carrying here between these oak planks, and, I know it of old, the time will come when I would give all, just to see this coffin again.

The priest has transformed the sad little chapel into a triumphal gate to Paradise. The flags are draped in clusters, the candles are flickering, amid the brilliance of the blue, white, and red, like so many stars, which, at the end of a beautiful day, appear in the sky amid the pink and the grey of the clouds.

The priest is clad in the garments stiff with gold. He walks around the coffin, swinging his incense-burner. He sends the soul on its way, toward the threshold of the other world.

Peace and Light!

This is what we invoke, O Lord, for those who leave us. This is your promise to us after so much suffering in darkness.

We have to cross the town from one end

to the other, then the drawbridge, following along by the riverside.

The twilight has faded as we pass like so many shadows through the gate of the cemetery.

Everything has been arranged as I had hoped.

While he waits for the moment when he may go to rest beside his mother and his brother, between the murmuring forest and the house where he grew up, he shall have a safe place here.

My friend, Colonel Étienne, has sent me this message: "If he is still here on All Souls' Day, we shall carry flowers to his grave, from the Staff."

Sleep in peace, now, my son, these first hours of the sleep that shall know no waking. As darkness closes in upon us I leave you, but you are not alone.

LXXI

At the hospital, lying in the bed where Robert died, there is already another wounded man.

In the cemetery, when I pushed open the gate this morning, the tombstone had been set in place.

I have nothing more to hope for here; I must leave now.

Just as I did three weeks ago, when I was hastening to him, I lean out of the train window. I want to see, on the hill-top, the place where he gave up his soul. What use to weary my eyes and my heart searching thus for him? Between the earth and the sky I hear a voice say to me: "Your beloved is no longer here."

Beyond the heavens, whose depths my eyes seem to penetrate, the sky is blue. The gold earth reflects this azure radiance. On each side of the railway track are rows of mountain ash bushes still, with their brilliant berries, their green leaves; like so many plants of coral and of green gold. The increasing speed of the train makes them appear like a single hedge as they fly by, one after another. I can scarcely look at them, they are so dazzling.

Why, O God, do you show me such earthly beauty at a moment when I am crushed under the blow which has killed my last son?

My people before me, I following their example, we have lived for the idea of perpetuating our honorable name. It is a name sprung from the fields of Normandy, from the sea of Brittany. It has been a watchword of duty, of hope, of all that one lives for.

How many times, as a young man, have I stamped out in me the desires, however passionate, which might have cast a shadow on the worthiness of this name.

I said to myself: "Remember those who bore it before you, those who shall bear it hereafter."

Thus our family name has served me as

a compass in my life of adventures. It was my earthly religion: a religion which did not detach one from the other, but which was within my reach.

I had built a temple for this name.

In my forest home there is a hall, high-ceilinged and long as a church. Over the chimney-place are the words of our motto, "Au Large!"—which was carried by our ships on their pennants to all the ports of the world. Near by, as my contribution to these family treasures, I have hung the map of Africa, where, amidst the volcanic mountains and the capricious windings of strange rivers, I had the privilege of writing our name upon one of the last morsels of unexplored land on the earth.

Around the map I have grouped the family portraits: Amable, who was a banker in the days of Louis XV; his son, an officer in blue, who, by his marriage with a Vendéenne, caused the blood of the Chouans to flow in our veins; Pierre-Chéri, who for a moment held the fickle affections of Princess Pauline; Uncle Gaspard, who followed Napoleon to Saint-Helena; and all the Jean-Louis, all the Paul-Louis, all the Charles-Henri, all the Robert-Hugues, who have done their duty on land and on sea, since the days when king and country were one, until this present glorious resurrection of the "Marseillaise."

I was not satisfied with building this house to shelter our name. I have traced its history in a little book which has touched many hearts.

This was what I had done out of respect for my forefathers, out of love for those who would continue the name. I used to recall proudly the saying of some philosopher: "He has lived fully who has brought up a son, built a house, written a book."

O God, how have you treated this too human wisdom!

LXXII

As I was leaving, several letters were handed to me; among them, one from Marie-Rose, my daughter, the only remaining child. She writes me from a hospital, where, since the beginning of the war, like all the women of France, she has been nursing the wounded.

I scarcely dared open this letter of my bereaved child. I was afraid of finding the tears which must flow for her own loss after so many sorrows as have followed, one upon another, this year. At eighteen she has a mother and two brothers in the tomb.

My little Marie-Rose, I feared the reading of your letter would take my remaining strength. . . . But in your grief you comfort me, as it is only of my sorrow you are thinking: "So, my dear father," you write, "you have suffered everything . . ."

You understand all too clearly how my soul is torn. And your comprehension comes as a refreshment. It inspires you to write this sentence, at which, as humble as love, God must Himself smile: "The sons which I could give you won't count."

They will count, my child, they will count. Our fathers have not lost all, since you are living.

LXXIII

And now, what am I to do?

One of the last times that we talked together, he and I, like friends whose thoughts run on together, side by side, toward the same horizon, my dear son said to me: "The men of your generation must keep on working; they must live to a good old age! Otherwise, who will be left to direct the children? Who can help them to fill the breach left by so many dead? The traditions of France must not perish with us. It is the men of your age who must gather up what remains and forge a new link in the broken chain. Those who have lost their sons shall find in the fatherless children dear companions to love and to guide."

It was not only out of affection, my Robert, that you spoke thus to me. You were talking with the perspicacity of the fearless on the threshold of the other world.

Just now, as I was looking out of the train window, at the passing landscape, I saw an old man ploughing a field. A child, caught up from his childish games, bridle in hand, was leading the aged horse. The grandfather, bowed earthward, was pushing with all his strength. Above the tombs he was preparing for this little child the future harvest.

I shall work in the same way.

LXXIV

How beautiful this French country is, through which we pass, in its autumn glory.

The forest, which used to cover these hillsides, remains like a crown upon their summit. Among this wild tangle of trees, generations of effort have made the green meadows, the gentle shelter of the valleys. Roads wind their way easily from one height to another, from one church steeple to another; gayly they go, bringing to all the happy chances of reunion.

There is room here for the wheat, for the vineyards, for the villages and the towns, for the churches and the schools, for the graves and for the cradles.

The sky, which spreads itself above this blessed land, seems to be one with it, as a soul seems one with a beautiful form.

This is not a mere highway. It is a safe harbor, a mother, a sweetheart. It has a spiritual personality, it is Our Country!

To live for such a country, to die for such a country. . . .

It is worth while!

THE END

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